

The FALL of the CURTAIN



HAROLD BEGBIE

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THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN



The Fall of the Curtain

By HAROLD BEGBIE



ILLUSTRATED BY
C. ALLAN GILBERT

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'And now the hand of fate is on the curtain

DON SEBASTIAN

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN

I

THE LETTER BAG

CHRISTMAS DAY, good reader. Morning service in the village church was over, and old Gregory Brough, his wife, and his callow brood were trooping over the snow-covered fields of Poyntz Park on their way home to dinner. Squire Brough was a jolly tubby little fellow, carrying his sixty years as lightly as a babe astride of a rocking-horse carries cocked hat and tin sword. His beaming red face and white hair gave him a character that his heart did not belie. As good a squire as ever farmed English acres and proved friend-in-need to the people on his estate was honest old Gregory; and though his income had steadily declined as his olive branches multiplied round about his table he kept a stout heart to the world and faced the future with as breezy a courage as ever. Sir Geoffrey Peveril bore into conflict against kennel-blooded, clip-eared, cuckoldy Roundheads.

"Think you that letter will come to-day, Jane?" he demanded of his wife in a stage whisper.

"I hope it may, dear Gregory. I sincerely hope it may."

"By Jupiter!" cried the fat little man, "that would be as fine a Christmas box as ever we gave mortal since we set up housekeeping, eh?"

"Indeed it would, dear Gregory," said the tall, stately old lady in her soft cooing voice.

"The girl's a good girl. As good a girl, Jane, as ever Providence pitchforked into the world to shift for herself. Look at her now with her hand on Jack's shoulder and t'other arm through our Nelly's. What a fine figure of a girl it is!"

"She has a beautiful saint-like face," replied Mrs. Brough. "She has been a very good governess to our girls and a great comfort to me. I am distressed to think she is leaving."

They had reached the little iron gate that separated the garden of the hall from the fields of the park. There was a rush on the part of the family towards the house.

"Now then!" roared old Gregory; "you must leave that letter bag alone till I come in!" The governess turned and smiled sweetly.

"We're going for the parcels," shouted back a pudding-faced boy over his shoulder; and then the youngsters disappeared with boisterous merriment, tumbling over each other through the doorway of the manor house.

The governess waited at the door for the old couple to arrive.

Hannah Mersey was a tall, slight girl, with little

grace or distinction in figure, but possessing one of those rare faces which deeply interest and perplex the student of physiognomy, while they attract attention even from the most casual of passers-by. It was a beautiful saint-like face in repose, as Mrs. Brough had said; but the sweet gravity of the saint was swept away when emotion, however trivial, surged through her veins. At such moments the face became charged with life; it lit up suddenly with a rare radiance; laughter danced in the eyes, the lips parted in smiles; or, if sadness was the cause, the eyes overflowed with the most tender sympathy and the voice trembled with the faint pathos of deeply felt grief. But no one had seen Hannah shed tears, and no one had ever heard her laugh.

Hannah was a brunette; her complexion was dark, but of that warm, soft darkness which appeals to the eye with greater attraction than does the more delicate skin of the light-haired Saxon. Her features were not regular; her lips were broad and firm, the chin square and determined, the nose far too strong for feminine face. But her eyes, of a deeper hue than her rich hair, atoned for any lack of refinement in her features. They were large eyes, looking calmly and resolutely out upon the world from beneath broad, well-shaped brows. Deep, mysterious eyes; at one moment sad and reflective, at the next expressing all the innocent vivacity and reckless merriment of a light-hearted girl. They were eyes that some people could not bear to look

upon, thinking that they pierced with unnatural sharpness through the flesh and read the mind's unuttered thoughts. At the present moment, as little Squire Brough and his tall wife crossed the drive, the girl's large dark eyes expressed tender regret and a sweet resignation of soul.

"She does not like leaving us," whispered old Gregory. "Now, I pray Heaven that letter has arrived!"

"The last Christmas in Poyntz," said Hannah, in the low musical voice that was habitual to her even in moments of excitement.

"Dear Hannah, I hope not!" exclaimed the squire's wife, placing her hand on the girl's arm.

"Last Christmas be hanged for a tale!" cried old Gregory, pushing them both through the doorway. "You'll come to us next Christmas, and eat as fat a turkey as ever gulped barley-meal and picked grass off the park meadow. And you'll come the Christmas after that, and the one after that, if Master Dick hasn't blown the roof off Poyntz Hall with his confounded chemicals, you'll——"

He was interrupted by the children rushing towards him with the letter bag. "Open it, open it!" they shouted in chorus.

"There's beastly few parcels!" growled the pudding-faced boy.

"P'raps there's a lot of postal orders in the letter bag," said another.

The squire drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, laid the bag solemnly on the hall chest that stood

near the blazing log fire, and then commanded the children to stand back. As he turned the key he stopped and looked towards the staircase.

"Where are you going, Hannah?" he shouted.

"There'll be no letters for me," the governess announced, smiling very sweetly from the stairs.

The squire's eldest son, a slim youth of two-and-twenty, with the scholar's concentration in his spectacled eyes, came into the hall at this moment, and heard Hannah's pathetic remark. He looked up at her, and their eyes met.

"No letters for you, girl! How do you know what letters are in my bag?" bawled the squire, affecting the greatest indignation. "How do you know the curate hasn't sent you a worsted book-marker, or that old Watson"—a notorious bachelor—"hasn't sent you a card with a significant bit of old Tupper on the back? I command you to stay."

By this time he had emptied the bag of its contents and was arranging the letters on the oak chest, while his good wife restrained the enthusiasm of the children.

The bright, crackling fire threw red flames on the oak walls, and gave a further touch of warmth and color to the animated scene. The boys laughed, and clattered with their stout boots on the stone floor; the girls stood whispering on tiptoe, craning their long necks to catch sight of the envelopes which the old squire, his jolly red face bent over the pile, was arranging in little heaps with a methodical steadiness that kept the whole group on the most painful

of tenterhooks. At the outskirts of the group the heir, Richard Brough, gazing with open admiration at the girl who rested her arms on the baluster and looked sadly on the merry scene.

Of a sudden the squire gave a shout of joy. "It's come! it's come!" he cried, waving an envelope over his white head.

"What is it?" yelled the boys.

"Oh, father, is it for me?" cried each young lady.

"I had a feeling it would come to-day," shouted the squire. "God bless my soul! I *knew* it would come to-day!"

"Dear Gregory," whispered his wife, "it may be a refusal. Pray do not say a word till we have opened the letter."

"A refusal!" cried the gallant old fellow. "Devil a bit! Open it, Jane! open it, and read it aloud. Silence for your mother, children! Order in the pigsty! The first little squeaker who opens mouth will go without plum-pudding. Not a word, now, not a word!"

A silence fell on the group. The old lady with quiet precision opened the envelope, put back her veil, and glanced over the letter. Then she smiled.

With a glad cry the fat little squire flung his short arms round the old lady's slim body. "What did I say?" he cried triumphantly. "It's the best Christmas present ever came into Poyntz Hall!"

"Father must go without his plum-pudding!" shouted one of the boys triumphantly. "You've interrupted mother."

"Silence, you young dog!" shouted the jubilant old fellow, prodding the youngster in the ribs, whilst the hubbub arose anew.

"Is the letter a present, father?" piped the girls.

"Silence, silence!" the squire bawled, banging his hand on the stout chest for order.

"When every one is quiet, Gregory, dear," remarked Mrs. Brough in her soft voice, "I will read the letter aloud."

A stillness fell on the group, and Mrs. Brough, turning round to face the now breathless family, held her eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose, and began to read the mysterious letter: "The Countess of Mane presents her compliments to Mrs. Brough——"

"Deucedly complaisant of her ladyship!" cried the delighted old Gregory.

"——presents her compliments to Mrs. Brough," repeated the squire's wife, "and begs to say that having heard from the Dean of Barkleton that Mrs. Brough's governess is seeking a fresh engagement, she will be very glad, on the recommendation of the dean, to give Miss Mersey a trial as companion to her little son, Lord Kyn. The rest of the letter," said Mrs. Brough, "is private."

"Hip! hip! hip!" cried the squire, waving his hand above his head.

"Hurrah!" yelled the whole family, hardly realizing the cause of this exultation.

The squire repeated the "Hip! hip! hip!" and again the family roared the triumphant "Hurrah!"

Hannah came down the stairs, her large eyes shining with a great radiance, and went towards Mrs. Brough with outstretched hands.

"How good, how sweet, how generous you are!" she said.

Mrs. Brough kissed the girl's brow. "I told the dear dean how pleased we should be, my dear, if the countess would decide in time to let us know on Christmas Day. Mr. Brough thought it would be such a nice Christmas surprise, dear. I am so glad, so very glad you are pleased."

The family returned to the chest. "Where are the letters, father?" they asked. "Aren't there any presents?" "What about postal orders?" "Hasn't Uncle Lionel sent up anything?" and so on, in a shrill chorus.

Released from Mrs. Brough's embrace, and with three letters in her hand, Hannah retired quietly from the noisy group and climbed the broad oak stairs to her bedroom. Her eyes were shining brightly, her lips were parted in a glad smile, and her heart beat with unaccustomed triumph in her breast. She took off her hat, loosened her jacket, and sat down in a low arm-chair by the dressing-table.

She looked at the letters in her lap with lax interest. "From my very dear mother," she said, in her soft, subdued voice, flinging one of the envelopes to the dressing-table. "I am in no mood for another sermon to-day. And this—now, whose writing is that?" She opened the envelope and slowly,

'drew out a letter. "Oh, my dear lover Richard!" she exclaimed; "and he took the trouble to disguise his dear handwriting on the envelope. How romantic! and such a short note. What a kind heart he has! 'Dearest,'" she read, "'my wishes for Christmas are the same as yours. I wish that Fate may soon relieve us from the secrecy of our engagement; that we may soon be married; that our happiness may be as unclouded as our love. Come to the laboratory at three in the afternoon. I must fold you in my arms on Christmas Day, and tell you something of great importance, something I am keeping as a great secret. Ever your most devoted.'" She kissed the letter and laughed to herself a little contemptuously. Then she opened the third letter. It was from the squire, enclosing a check with "the best wishes and heartfelt gratitude for your devotion, from Gregory Brough, and Jane his faithful wife." Hannah kissed the check, this time with sincerity.

Dinner at one o'clock that day was a festival of joy. Presents had not been so numerous as last year, but old Gregory had atoned for that by distributing bright crown pieces to his children, and exhorting them to laugh their loudest or they would have no appetite for the good things that were a-cooking in the kitchen. The wood fire roared royally in the grate, the holly berries amid rich green leaves on the walls and mantel-piece, the red faces of the children round the board—loaded with golden apples, red-yellow oranges, a towering white cake,

piles of gaudy crackers, and dishes of white almonds and bluish raisins—were aglow with life and merriment; while the white-haired squire at one end, and his stately, demure, old wife at the other, completed the picture of a happy English family keeping one of the best festivals in the almanac in a jolly, old-fashioned British way.

“Heir Richard!” cried the father, pouring out a glass of port, “unless you blow us all up with your unsavory chemicals, may we be here next year drinking to the family in general, and to the future Mrs. Richard in particular.” Richard started; Hannah quite calmly turned her attention to replenishing with almonds and raisins the plate of the pudding-faced boy. “I don’t care who she is, my boy, so long as she’s a lady and carries a guinea or two in her purse. The day is gone when the sons of this house could go a-wooing fancy free. Land is not what it was, and you’re not likely to turn out such a good farmer as your old father. So, son Richard, choose you a wife who’ll help to keep the family in port and the horses in corn. And—I don’t want to damp your feelings—but wherever you go, and whomever you woo, know this, that you’ll never bring into Poyntz Hall a better, a more beautiful, a more exquisite creature than its present mistress—God bless her! My dear!” he continued, peeping mischievously through the dishes to the other end of the table, “I raise my glass to you. You grow younger and more beautiful every day of your life.”

“And you, Gregory dear,” returned the lady, rais-

ing her glass, "grow ever more generous and chivalrous as the years go round. Dear Gregory, I drink to you. God bless you, my dear husband."

Hannah looked first at one and then at the other, smiling in silent admiration. "How sweet you are!" she exclaimed softly.

"And we must drink a bumper to Hannah!" cried old Gregory. "Hannah's going to live with a belted earl, she's going to breathe the same perfumed air as a countess; but she won't forget Poyntz Hall, she won't forget our peeling paint and tarnished wall-papers. And she'll come back next year, when the boys are home from Winchester, when the girls are back from Germany, and when Heir Dick is sitting at the table with Miss Millionaire at his side munching Ribston Pippins out of her father-in-law's orchards!"

So the dinner came to an end. Everybody was happy. The boys had eaten more than they could comfortably hold, the girls had treasured up any number of cracker mottoes in their bosoms, the squire had lighted his black briar pipe and dragged an armchair to the fire, Dick had retired to his laboratory in the basement cellars, and Mrs. Brough, according to her custom, had gone upstairs to lie down for the afternoon.

Hannah in her own room was reading her mother's Christmas homily with a smile of indifference, while her thoughts were with the Countess of Mane.

II

THE CHRISTMAS FROLIC

“**D**ICK, you may kiss me!” Richard Brough hurried from a table littered with test-tubes and evil-looking bottles, and took Hannah in his arms. “Have you come for my great secret?” he asked, kissing her quickly and none too enthusiastically.

“I’m dying to know it,” she answered, remembering suddenly that the serious-looking boy had a secret to tell and wishing that chemicals did not smell so abominably.

Richard Brough perched himself on a table in the lamp-lighted laboratory. Hannah stood before him, her hands clasped behind her.

“The governor thinks I am going to rehabilitate the house by marrying the daughter of some purse-proud vulgarian,” he said, speaking quickly, his brows knitted, his eyes gleaming sharply behind their spectacles. “But I’m going to restore our fallen fortunes in another way. I’m on the verge of a discovery that will revolutionize science.”

“How splendid!” Hannah said in her low voice.

“To know that you believe in me is my great encouragement,” Dick said eagerly. “It spurs me on when things go wrong, or when theories don’t

work out in practice. But now I'm on the right path. It's no use explaining to you the details——"

"Yes, yes; I want to know. I want to learn from you," she said quietly, praying fervently that he would not be very long or dull.

Then Dick explained, and Hannah listened with intelligence in her eyes, every now and then murmuring a soft "Splendid!" or, "How clever you are!" as the young chemist unfolded the mysteries of his great discovery.

"And when will you know for certain if it is a success?" she asked.

"In six months."

"And, Dick, will it make us very rich?"

"Tremendously rich."

"How much a year do you think?"

"Not less than ten thousand," said Dick modestly.

"How splendid!" she sighed, looking all admiration and humility.

"You've no idea how grand it is, the feeling that one is making a vast discovery," he said. His thin, pinched face lighted up for a moment with the glow of conscious success.

"I can imagine it!" sighed Hannah, thinking of Kyn Castle, and the possibilities that were opening before her.

There was a silence for a moment, and Hannah's long brown fingers wandered over the bottles, touching them carelessly, as she dreamed of the new life waiting for her in Kyn Castle.

"Be careful," said Dick; "some of those bottles

are dangerous. That one there," he continued, "contains the most powerful and wonderful of poisons. Ten drops, dear Hannah, and you would go to sleep for a couple of days; twenty drops, and you would go to sleep for ever and ever."

"How dreadful!" said Hannah, stifling a yawn.

"Doesn't it make you realize," he said eagerly, and with so much enthusiasm in his voice that the girl's attention was attracted, "doesn't it make you realize how sublime a science is chemistry? Think of the power it places in man's hands! With this little bottle of innocent white liquid I could send this whole house to that sleep from which there is no waking! Drop by drop, day after day, and soon the body would yield up the battle, and die of exhaustion that none would suspect to be unnatural. Think of it! Think of the power of chemistry, the tremendous forces in the hands of the chemist!"

"What a good thing you are not a villain!" said Hannah, smiling.

She was older than the slight youth at her side, and even when she had most looked forward to marriage with him as a release from the drudgery of teaching children, she had felt a very keen sense of superiority in all her intercourse with him. She was a woman; Richard Brough a boy. And now the wicked little spirit of Ambition, which had been slumbering and fitfully dreaming in her bosom all through the long days of an unhappy childhood, was beginning to yawn and stretch its limbs, to the great discomfort of other and more peaceful spirits that

had lived there happily enough till the present hour. Among these other spirits was the spirit of Love, and the vigorous young Ambition, gaping and kicking as it came nearer and nearer to the moment of awakening, was causing Love in particular exceeding unhappiness.

Her father, a clergyman, had died of a broken heart toiling in the noisome alleys of Plaistow, and the memory of the childhood spent in that somber quarter of the town was alive and vivid. She had found Dick's love-making a pleasant interlude in the midst of her days; it had served to brighten the hours and hold a taper to the dreary blackness of her future. But the letter bag had changed all that. She no longer felt that to marry him would be a great social step, or a relief from the toil of her daily work. She was beginning to realize that Poyntz Hall, with its impoverished fortunes, its shabby grandeur, was but a small speck in the universe, and that even she, poor and without powerful relations as she was, might enter and play a part in the larger affairs of a greater world. She did not dream of marrying a duke and setting up a salon in London; she only felt, dimly and chaotically, that she would soon be looking upon a nobler scene than any she had yet witnessed, and that the great Stage Manager of this world's concerns, having called her into this fair scene, might possibly give her a part to play of greater distinction than any she had yet dreamed of. With these thoughts in her mind, then, Hannah found Dick's love-making a little tedious,

and we regret to say that she rejoiced when the tea bell rang with a whole-heartedness that, had he known it, might almost have sent Master Dick to the bottle of poison.

But Hannah had long learned to hide her feelings. She could dissemble so deftly and successfully that she made people mistake her very dissimulation for candor. And so Dick joined the tea-party with happiness in his heart, and Hannah appeared there as the incarnation of all that is ingenuous and frank.

After tea came rollicking games. The hall rang with laughter and the clatter of many feet. The squire himself joined in hide-and-seek, and Mrs. Brough, tall and demure, was among the noisy troop who peeped behind curtains and opened the lids of oak chests searching for the jolly old gentleman. It was Hannah who rejoiced the whole party by discovering the pudding-faced boy, who, when it came to his turn to hide, selected with considerable wisdom the larder for his fastness. It was Hannah who played the piano when dear old Gregory and his wife led off in "Sir Roger de Coverley." It was Hannah who sang the "Mistletoe Bough," and caused everybody to realize the witchery of Christmas. It was Hannah who made the entire family feel how sweetly, and with what sublime repression of herself, she made the frolic a success. Such a success! Dick lost something of his self-concentration: the pudding-faced boy (but we know not what provisions he had laid in during his tenure of

the larder) appeared to find complete joy in things other than eating: the young ladies were girls again, and forgot all about Martin Tupper as they romped with flying hair and rosy faces: the old squire, of course, was radiant and triumphant—his laugh echoed above the shrillest note that came from juvenile throat, his voice rose above everybody's, his enthusiasm kept them all going when the stoutest youngster panted that he could go on no longer, and his jokes and pranks sent them all into fits of laughter even when ribs ached and lips were stiff.

So the games went on till eight o'clock, when the family sat down to a cold supper, waiting upon themselves, while sounds of revelry rose in the servants' hall. Then after supper there followed stories—stories of ghosts, stories of the family, stories of Christmas Days long since lost in the mists of years; and then at last came good-night. Each child went to the old man in his deep chair before the roaring wood fire, and he, laying his hand on the head of each of his children, called down God's blessing on him, and then with a loud kiss pushed him off to bed. When Hannah approached with outstretched hand and sad smiling face, old Gregory jumped out of his chair, caught her in his arms, gave her a jolly kiss, and then laying his hand on her beautiful dark hair, he said with a sudden and very genuine fervor, "And God bless you, my lass!"

When Hannah reached her room she did not immediately undress. She drew back the curtains from the window, and pulled up the holland blind

through which a white moon was shining with singular brightness. She stood by the window, her hands behind her, looking moodily on the moon-blanchèd fields where the glittering snow lay hard and smooth. The only sound that reached her ears was the muffled roar of the swollen stream as it swept between its banks, and the occasional thud of snow slipping like a small avalanche from the heavily freighted trees to the gleaming ground. She could see the marks in the snow where the family had walked on their way from church, and she began to think of Christmas Day, and of the old English merry-making in which she had just acted so successful a part.

"It is all acting," she said to herself. "All my life I have been playing a part. People like me because they think I like them. Some people. Some people hate me; they seem to know I am a hypocrite. But most people like me. The squire likes me. Dear old squire!"

Then she thought of the innocent joys of that Christmas Day, and of old Gregory Brough. How sweet, how gracious he was: how considerate: how generous: how good! Good? She was good too, but then her goodness was acting. She did not feel good. She had never committed a crime, scarcely a peccadillo. She went to church as regularly as the squire; she really worked hard to make the children love their lessons; she paid visits to stuffy cottages, and carried comfort to many a sick pillow. Yes, she lived what people called a good life. But she did

not feel good; she knew she was not good. Why? Why was it, she asked herself, that she did not love goodness, as the squire loved it, as his wife loved it?

She looked with sad interest on the beautiful white park, the snow-laden trees, the white stars sparkling in the vault of heaven. Then she recalled some verses she had once learned by heart—

“Weary of myself, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be.”

How did they go on? Some one had told her that the verses contained all the philosophy of Spinoza. What was that philosophy? Ah! looking up at the stars, she remembered more of the lines—

“Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
These demand not that the things without them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

“And with joy the stars perform their shining,
And the sea its long moon-silvered roll;
For alone they live, nor pine with noting
All the fever of some differing soul.”

But what was the philosophy? Did it bring rest, did it yield the peace that passeth all understanding?

With a sigh she drew the curtains across the window, and turned back into the room. As she undressed her thoughts reverted to the happy Christmas Day she had just spent, to the noisy laughing children, to the gentle old lady, to the jolly old squire. The innocence of it, the innocence of it!

She took her candle from the dressing-table and

walked toward the bed. She pulled back the bed-clothes and blew out the candle. Then with her hand on the clothes, one knee raised, she paused. The next moment she was on her knees, praying with hard eyes and locked jaws for the capacity to love goodness.

Once in bed the girl's thoughts quickly reverted to her future, and the young Ambition kicked and gaped with an energy that promised a speedy broad wakefulness.

But Hannah's prayer was to be answered abundantly.

III

HANNAH MAKES HER FIRST ENTRANCE ON THE LARGER SCENE

IT was a raw and gusty morning in the early days of January when Hannah Mersey, having paid her mother a farewell visit, took her seat in the train at Paddington Station, and settled down in the corner to dream of Kyn Castle. The rain lashed the windows and pattered angrily on the roof of the carriage as the good express rattled through the misty country with thunderings worthy of Hannah's destination. It was impossible to see out of the streaming window, but she found in the gray glass, with the rushing, blurred country beyond, as fine a background for the gaudy colors of her dream as is given to the sleeper in the darkness of night. So she sat there, and piled her castle high into the air, till the rain ceased, the wind died down, and a watery sun cast thin shadows on the sodden land. The day was now wearing to afternoon, and some of the people in the carriage had begun to eat hard-boiled eggs, biscuits, and sandwiches; but Hannah, with sandwiches in her bag on the rack, still sat looking out of the rain-spotted window, dreaming of the life that waited for her behind the stout walls of Kyn Castle. At last, long after the other passengers had ceased to munch

their sandwiches and eggs, her own airy castle came toppling to the ground. The train slowed down, and presently pulled up at a small station. Hannah was in the midst of the castle-building when, as the train came with a jolt to a standstill, she heard the name of "Kyn" lustily shouted from the platform. With a start she jumped up, lowered the window with a bang, and then turned to lift her packages from the rack.

"Allow me," said a strong voice behind her, and a hand went up to the rack and lifted down her parcel. Hannah noticed that the hand was very brown and very well shaped. She looked around. It was only an instant; the next she was standing on the still soaking platform and the stranger was striding away from her.

But what work can be effected in a minute! For one thing the stranger had photographed himself upon Hannah's mind so clearly, so distinctly, that had she never seen him again she could for ever after have drawn his face to the very life. It was a type of face to appeal irresistibly to a woman of Hannah's nature. It was a strong, iron strong, face; but the strength was of the noblest kind. There was as much gentleness as firmness in the mouth; as much sweetness as gravity in the large eyes set wide apart in the broad brows; as much refinement as force in the finely cut nose. Then the stranger was tall and well knit. There was distinction in every line of his body. There was distinction, too, in the strong, low voice

that had uttered those two words, "Allow me," as the strong brown hand went up to the rack. He seemed to Hannah the very mirror of chivalry, the embodiment of masculine power. She wondered why she had not seen him in the carriage during those long hours of castle-building. She was angry with herself for having built so assiduously with her face glued to the dreary window. How much better if she had looked and looked and looked on that strong calm face, and looking built an altogether fairer castle with Cupid for seneschal!

She was watching the stranger when a very tall, burly man, who walked with his knees forever bent forward, as though anxious to minimize his inches, approached and half touched his hat.

"Are you Miss Mersey?" he said, looking straight over Hannah's head.

"Yes," said Hannah.

"I thought you was," he replied, laughing quietly to himself. "I'm going to drive you to the castle. All the carriages are out to-day, and as I was coming in for a box of seeds I told the housekeeper I would drive you out. Give me your parcels." He spoke without ever looking at Hannah, and in a tone that implied condescension and dignified amiability. He also seemed to be chuckling quietly to himself the whole time he was speaking.

She gave him her parcels, and walked beside him up the platform. He was, as we have said, a very big man; his chest was exceedingly deep, his shoulders wondrously broad, and yet his long legs, with

the knees always bent, appeared to be mere sticks, if one might judge from the way his trousers flopped over his boots as he walked. His face was broad and fat. He wore closely clipped black whiskers, which left his button mouth free to smile perpetually under a little fat pudgy nose. Close to the nose were his eyes, small pig-eyes of a very dark dull color, that stared dumbly ahead under a pair of bushy, unbrushed eyebrows. Hannah wondered who he was; the castle-building had included a lordly footman, with gleaming buttons and tremendous cockade.

"I'm the gardener," he said suddenly. "My name is Mr. Criddle. Are you fond of flowers?"

"Very," said Hannah.

He chuckled, well pleased. "A garden's like the world," he said, in his condescending voice; "it grows all sorts, and the finest looking aren't always the best, no, not by no means." He sucked in his laughter. Hannah felt very much as if she were at Sunday School.

"Your box will go up in the luggage cart," he said, as they approached the station's exit.

"There's more than one," said Hannah anxiously.

Mr. Criddle chuckled softly again. "Things have altered since I was young," he said in his subdued voice. "A servant with more than one box was as rare then as a cabbage with two hearts. But all your boxes will be taken up if they're labeled. Come along, the pony's been waiting a long time."

But Hannah did not hear him. In the station

yard stood a tall dog-cart, and her stranger was sitting in it with the reins in his hand, while a groom was helping a porter to pack some boxes in behind. The stranger, whose head was bent round as he watched the groom, looked up and saw Hannah. Their eyes met.

"Here's the pony-cart," said Mr. Criddle, approaching a little fat, white animal in a small two-wheeled cart. "He's a good pony; doesn't want any one to hold his head while I'm in anywhere. A pony that wants some one to hold him, and might kick you to death and a trap to pieces, would cost more money! It's a illogical world, isn't it?"

As they drove out from the station, Mr. Criddle touched his hat to the handsome stranger.

"That's Sir Michael Dulverton," said the gardener, more condescending than ever. "You've heard of him, I suppose?"

"No," Hannah answered.

Mr. Criddle, who was sitting bolt upright on the very edge of the seat, jerked the reins and chuckled in his throat. "Governesses don't know everything, then!" he murmured. "It's like doctors, they can't cure things you can't cure for yourself, and only a fool would expect it."

"Who is Sir Michael Dulverton?" asked Hannah.

"He's a man that the papers say ought to be Prime Minister of England," Mr. Criddle replied, laying his whip tenderly on the broad back of the white pony.

Hannah's heart sank.

"Is he married?" she asked.

Criddle this time chuckled almost aloud. "What's politics got to do with marriage?" he asked in a gently expostulating tone. "You ladies are all the same. My wife when she goes a train journey makes the time pass by picking out the bachelors from the married men. Weeding, she calls it!"

His eyes were wrinkled up with laughter, as he sat straight upright, gazing intently between his pony's ears. After a pause he went on in the same very subdued voice, "Sir Michael's a near neighbor of ours; got a little property beside of ours, but it's nothing to speak of. He's poor as I am, for he's got position to keep up, and I haven't. That's the compensating balance. He's lazy, or he'd be the Prime Minister; that's what the papers say. He's the sort of man that makes every one say he can do great things, though you've never seen him do anything at all. He's fond of her ladyship, and likes being at the castle. He and she are hand in glove, as you might say. And then, Sir Michael's powerful fond of our little lord, wonderfully fond of our little lord, he is."

"Has he no children of his own?" asked Hannah innocently.

Criddle ducked his head with silent laughter. "You're determined to know, you are," he said with huge delight. "No, Sir Michael lives with Lady Dulverton." He paused. "Lady Dulverton—his mother. He's unmarried. People say he loved a

young lady, and she died, and he hasn't got over it. Funny kind of love that is!"

They were now crawling slowly towards the few cottages that lined the road leading to the gates of Kyn Castle. On a bench outside a little white-washed inn sat an old red-faced man in shirt sleeves and carpet slippers, sucking at a long church-warden pipe, and blinking at the sunlight on the rain puddles. "That's a publican and sinner," said Criddle; "his name is Timothy Budge, but there's little of Timothy about him, saving 'the stomach sake;' his son William is valet to the earl, and thinks more of fine clothes than the courts of heaven. That inn is called 'The Cripple's Ease,' our earl's father chose the title, but I want it called 'The Sinner's Ease,' or 'The Half-way House to Hell.'" After a pause Mr. Criddle, stealing a sly glance at the little hamlet, remarked that the scene was pretty.

"It's very peaceful," Hannah replied.

"Peaceful!" chuckled Criddle, drawing in on the left as wheels approached from behind. "Yes, it looks peaceful; it looks more like a picture where things can't happen than a bit of the real world where things do happen most astounding." He paused as a dog-cart flashed by, and then went on, while Hannah looked and looked after the dog-cart. "You wouldn't think that there was a regular storm going on here now, would you?"

"Yes," said Hannah, still following the dog-cart.

"You've made a mistake," said Criddle, with a

pitying laugh. "You wouldn't think there was a storm going on here."

"What sort of storm?" Hannah asked wearily.

"A religious storm; the most dangerous of all the storms there is. It's likely to upset the whole village, that's a fact." By the earnestness of his voice Hannah could see that Criddle was on his favorite ground. "Our clergyman," he went on, "recommended us last Sunday morning to pray for the souls of those we have lost! Actually, pray for the souls of those we have lost!"

"And is that wrong?" asked Hannah.

"Wrong!" exclaimed Criddle in his quietest tones; "why, of course it's wrong. It's absurd."

"Is it?"

"Of course it is," Criddle made answer, smiling all over his face. "'As a tree falls so shall it lie.' You can't alter that. If you're good you go to heaven, if you're wicked you go to hell. There's no getting away from that. And there's a great gulf fixed between these two. And even if there wasn't, the people in heaven wouldn't want to go to the people in hell, and the people in hell wouldn't want to go to the people in heaven. Sheep and goats don't mix, do they? Now," he added, lowering his voice to a whisper, "there's some people up at the castle at this present moment who wouldn't be happy if they went to heaven. They couldn't stand the democratizing of it. They want to lord it over everybody. And they live riotous lives; they gamble there till one o'clock in the morning, their talk at

table is light and silly and ungodly. They will die and go to hell. They can't alter it, and I can't alter it. And what's the use of my praying for them when they're dead?" He chuckled with delight at the bare idea. "If I sow mignonette I don't expect brocoli to come up; if you eat more than is good for you, you don't expect not to get a pain, do you? Everything's by law. Life is——"

He stopped suddenly, and hastily touched his hat to a little untidy man who had just come out from one of the fields on the side of the road. For some minutes after that salute he did not speak. At length, in a whisper, he said: "That's his lordship."

"Who?" cried Hannah.

"His lordship—the earl." Then glancing swiftly and slyly over his shoulder to assure himself that Lord Mane was not within hearing, he said: "He's a odd little man to look at; more like a farmer, isn't he? I've seen him drive his own bullocks to market. He'll have a high place in the next world. He thinks more of farming than he does of company. He don't mix with them up in the castle; he eats his dinner by himself in his own room, lives here all the year round, and goes to bed at a Christian hour."

They turned in at the magnificent park gates, guarded by crouching lions, and traveled slowly under a wide avenue of far-spreading beech, elm, and chestnut trees. And that dirty little man, in his rough, mustard-colored suit, his absurd little billycock hat, hobnailed boots, shabby brown leather

gaiters, was the lord of this domain! Hannah could hardly believe Mr. Criddle. The glance she had given the little man was of the most cursory kind, but she remembered that he had struck her as looking very like a fox. The long, sharp nose, the small, twinkling eyes, the red whiskers, the narrow face, the carriage of the head—which looked as if it were craning over its own neck—even though she had noticed these casually and without interest as the cart jolted by, they had momentarily impressed her as making up between them a face as like a fox as any picture of Reynard she had ever seen.

The pony was moving faster now, and soon the broad avenue opened out, disclosing to the delighted Hannah a glorious stone mansion glittering with innumerable diamond-pane windows, and lifting its stately turrets, from one of which streamed the Red Cross of St. George, high above the trees surrounding it. Kyn Castle had been built, on the site of the old moat-guarded Norman castle, by Gerard Christmas, and in its vast windows, its splendid proportions, its glorious solidity, it expressed as finely as Hardwick Hall the breadth and grandeur of the sounding times of the great Elizabeth. There was something so impressive in its massiveness, something so joyous in its spacious bays with their mulioned and transomed windows, that Hannah would scarce have uttered an exclamation of surprise if the high oak door, standing like a rigid sentry under the stone-wrought arms, had opened suddenly, pouring a troop of richly dressed gallants and merry

damsels into the glorious sunshine of the spacious forecourt. It was all Elizabethan, and the thought that men in tweed suits lived there seemed to be something of an anachronism. Hannah forgot to think of Sir Michael Dulverton; she gazed with hungry eyes at the mansion growing vaster and vaster as the little fat white pony trotted towards it, and unconsciously she began her castle-building again. She was to live there! She was to walk in its corridors, to look out from those splendid windows upon the beautiful pleasance below; to eat there, sleep there, read there, talk there, work there!

"To the back door, I suppose?" said Criddle, sitting more rigidly upright than ever.

"Yes—no—I don't know," Hannah answered, sick at heart. "It doesn't matter. Do whatever is usual."

"There's no precedent," said Criddle, chuckling. "You're the first governess we've engaged. Servants, of course, go to the back; but you're different from that—according to modern ways of thinking. I tell you what," with much condescension, "I'll take you round to the north entrance. This here is the west. The north is neither front nor back, and that hits your case very pretty, doesn't it?"

So Hannah was deposited at the door that was neither front nor back, though it was a very stately door, and much finer than the front door at Poyntz Hall, and was admitted into Kyn Castle by a maid-servant, who conducted her to the housekeeper's

room with scant courtesy if with no actual rudeness.

Mrs. Whittle, a black-browed, hatchet-faced woman of sixty, received Hannah with freezing dignity, eyed her critically, almost fiercely, and after some trifling conversation marched her solemnly to the sitting-room prepared for her use. Tea was brought in, and Mrs. Whittle retired with the announcement that she would return directly she had learned her ladyship's pleasure regarding Miss Mersey's arrangements.

Left alone, Hannah clenched her teeth and her long brown hands very hard, and gave full rein to the bitterness in her soul. She was very unhappy, unhappier than she had ever been before. Life appeared intolerable. Her dreams had been so roseate the reality was the grayness of death. She could think of nothing but some means of avenging herself on the gardener, on Mrs. Whittle, and the maid who had received her as a cook might receive the scullery-maid. And straightway she began her dreaming again. She would make friends with the countess, she would ingratiate herself with that mighty lady, she would become her friend and confidante, and then—then she would bundle Mrs. Whittle out of doors, bully the maid-servant into terror, and rule that narrow-minded Hebraist of a gardener till his life became a burden to him.

So pleased was Hannah with this vision that she rose from her chair beside the fire, and went to the table for tea. In the midst of her meal, and when

she was just acting in her mind the scene wherein Mrs. Whittle was to cringe at her feet whining for mercy, the door opened and that worthy appeared, looking, it must be admitted, as little humbled as any lord mayor sending a miserable sinner to the healthy seclusion of a cell.

"Her ladyship has returned," she said coldly, eying Hannah as a schoolmaster eyes the wicked boy in his form. "She will pass this door on her way to her room, and I will ask her if she cares to see you."

"That is very good of you," said Hannah, smiling.

Mrs. Whittle,—who was of a middle height, wore a mob cap, and looked as forbidding as a growling mastiff,—made no answer, but walked to the door, held it slightly open, and while she stood there listening for the countess's footfall regarded Hannah with critical severity.

"You must find your work very difficult in so large a house," said Hannah, adopting her most winning tone, and looking with great admiration at the stern, unbending matron at the door.

"Her ladyship is satisfied with the manner in which I perform my duties," rejoined Mrs. Whittle.

Hannah's face betokened nothing save sweetness, unless it were her mind's full realization that Mrs. Whittle was conferring upon her a great honor in talking so freely about her affairs.

"There is nothing so nice as tea after a long journey," she said presently.

"I never take anything else," Mrs. Whittle answered.

After that Hannah gave up all attempts to propitiate the black-browed woman, and with becoming modesty, being still in the Presence, continued her tea.

In a few minutes there was the sound of laughter in the corridor, a woman's cold, emotionless laughter. Then a man's voice, a little loud, a little coarse; then the woman's voice, loud, high, emotionless. More heartless laughter, and after that the sound of a woman's dress rustling as she walked. Mrs. Whittle opened the door a little wider, and passed noiselessly into the corridor.

Hannah, sitting opposite the door, pretending to eat bread and butter, while her heart beat furiously (for how much depended on the countess!), strained her ears, but could hear nothing of what Mrs. Whittle said. The countess's answer, however, was plain enough. "Has she had her tea? Well, then, I'll see her to-morrow. I can't be bothered now; I am going to lie down before dinner." There was the muffled sound of Mrs. Whittle's voice, and then the countess spoke again: "Of course not. She will see him to-morrow." Then the sound of the dress rustling onwards, and after a minute's pause the cold, emotionless voice again, "Has Sir Michael been over this afternoon?" "No, my lady," and then the dress rustled on out of hearing, and Mrs. Whittle returned.

"Her ladyship will see you to-morrow after

breakfast," said the matron, colder, blacker-looking than ever.

"That will be very nice," said Hannah. "And Lord Kyn, may I go and make his acquaintance?"

"You will see his lordship to-morrow," replied Mrs. Whittle. "You will have your dinner served at seven in this room, and, if you wish, I will now show you your bedroom."

Hannah expressed her gratitude, and followed Mrs. Whittle into the corridor. As they walked together a man turning the corner from another passage came suddenly upon them. Mrs. Whittle drew aside to let him pass.

"Ah, Mrs. Whittle!" he exclaimed, screwing a glass into his eye, "I was just coming to beg a cup of tea from you."

He looked at Hannah, and then doubtfully at Mrs. Whittle. He was inclined to be stout, with a large, heavy face, bold intelligent eyes, and a good-natured sensual mouth; a man who looked as if he might have bid good-bye to the twenties, and was perhaps preparing for himself the port of the forties. He wore his dark hair a trifle long, spoke in a deep, pompous voice, and continually pursed his broad lips.

Mrs. Whittle seemed for the moment a little startled, but she quickly recovered, and having begged the gentleman to kindly await her presence in the housekeeper's room, continued her march to Hannah's bedroom.

Just as the housekeeper was about to withdraw,

Hannah, burning to know something more of the family, asked if Mrs. Whittle could let her look at a photograph of the little Lord Kyn.

"His lordship has never been photographed," replied Mrs. Whittle, and withdrew.

IV

INTRODUCES THE READER AND MISS MERSEY TO THE RIGHT HONORABLE THE COUNTESS OF MANE

HER ladyship having eaten her breakfast in her boudoir, and having glanced over her letters at the dressing-table, was now preparing to leave her room. She had held cards in her soft white hands until nearly two in the morning, and was feeling neither very well nor, having lost considerably in the game, very contented. But much of her distress of soul vanished when, on her way to the door, she paused for an instant before her cheval glass. Happy the rosewood that framed so exquisite a picture! The countess was tall, gracefully proportioned, and carried her small head with the regal dignity of a queen. Her complexion, for which it must be conceded her maid was more responsible than her Maker, was of the most fairy-like delicacy; the pearly whiteness of the skin rivaled the lily, and the soft flush on the rounded cheeks was infinitely more warm and winsome than the blush of a spring rose. And then her blue eyes! Though they lacked soul and all the glorious expression of a fine mind, they shone with so much dignity, so much pride, that they dazzled and confounded the impious critic who looked into that queen-like face

only to find faults. Beautiful, proud blue eyes; light, innocent blue eyes; a blue that suggested in the midst of that pink-white flesh thoughts of fine china—clean thoughts, fresh thoughts, happy thoughts. And above the white brow that rose so gracefully from the round blue eyes was piled our queen's crown—a crown of gleaming red gold, shimmering in God's sun with a hundred twinkling lights. The joyousness of that glorious hair! The triumph, the victory of it! Momus confronted by such splendor had surely bowed his head to the earth, and held his peace.

The countess walked from her room with a certain sense of happiness. The winter sun that poured in through the mullioned windows had glinted on her fine hair as she paused for that fleeting instant before the mirror. She became freshly conscious of her beauty; and what is the loss of a few guineas and a night's sleep to the compliments of a broad mirror that cannot flatter, cannot lie? When the countess reached her morning-room and rang the bell for Hannah she was in as sweet a temper as any fashionable beauty ever enjoyed at eleven of the morning.

Hannah was dumfounded by the beauty of the stately countess as soon as she entered the room. It was, perhaps, well for her that this was the case, for it certainly tended to put Lady Mane in still greater good humor with herself, and consequently with all the world. With a smile the mistress of Kyn Castle extended her hand to the admiring gov-

erness, and asked if she had been quite comfortably provided for.

"The house is full of guests," said she, in her calm, emotionless voice; "but Mrs. Whittle is an excellent woman, and I am sure she did her best for you."

"I have been quite comfortable, my lady," said Hannah.

"Do you sing?" asked the countess suddenly.

"A little—to myself."

"You have a very musical voice. When the castle is quieter you must sing to me."

"Your ladyship is very kind." Hannah's heart was beating, and her low voice trembled.

"Your work will not be difficult," the countess went on, looking with no little interest at the tall, slim brunette who stood so modestly before her. "My son is delicate, and he is only six years old. We do not wish him to be overworked. In truth, Miss Mersey, we want you rather as a companion and playfellow for the little man. You will play with him in the garden, and take him with you on your wanderings through the park. And I shall be glad if you will keep him as much as possible from the guests. I do not care for him to mix with many people at present. The park and gardens are big, though, and you will have plenty of places to amuse yourself in. I hope you won't find it very dull."

"I shall like it, I am sure," said Hannah gratefully.

The countess paused as if she wished Hannah

would say something more. "You really have a very beautiful voice, Miss Mersey," she said at last; "will you be very kind, and sing me a song?—anything you like, any little thing you can remember."

Hannah bowed with a grave smile, and went to the little rosewood piano standing beside the pale blue wall. In her mind there was a perfect tempest of anxiety as to the choice of her song; she felt that her very fortunes depended on the choice. At length, almost unconsciously, she struck the notes of a little song composed many years before by her father, the poor clergyman at rest in a London cemetery:—

Roses for my lady, she is fair:
Roses for her bosom, for her hair:
 She can never, never love me,
 She is ah! so high above me,
And in silence I must worship, and despair.

Roses for my lady, she is sweet:
Roses for her head, and for her feet:
 I shall die while they are blowing,
 I shall die without her knowing—
When the sun is on the river and the wheat.

When the notes died away the countess smiled, and Hannah looking up met her beautiful blue eyes. "That is a very pretty song, Miss Mersey," said the countess, "but it is dreadfully sad—oh, dreadfully, dreadfully sad!"

There was a knock at the door, and, with the knock, the door opened. The pompous man with

the black hair and broad, sensual lips, whom Hannah had met in the corridor on the previous day, entered the room with a complacent smile.

"Music hath charms!" he said, in his deep, authoritative voice. "Forgive me, dear countess, but I could not resist the temptation, I really couldn't. I thought you had broken through your rules and were singing here all alone to the Sèvres china and the Chippendale chairs."

Lady Mane smiled very sweetly and graciously. There was a flush in her cheeks that the maid, great artist as she was, could never woo into that soft round flesh. "You thought I was singing to empty chairs?" she laughed.

"So many great artists do," he answered, showing his white teeth. "After all, between the ears of the Philistines at St. James's Hall and the well-bred legs of an aristocratic chair, I would choose the legs."

"And the Sèvres china?" laughed the countess.

"At least it is not cracked," he replied.

"But the song you heard was sad, it was a little tragedy in two verses," said the countess.

"All songs are tragedies," he answered, "but they generally run to three verses, with a waltz chorus to each verse. And why, my dear countess, should you not sing a sad song? Are you never trisful?"

"Not after breakfast," she said, and introduced Mr. Oliver Bolt, "a poet of no reputation," to Hannah Mersey.

Oliver Bolt gave a little stately bow to Hannah, and then turned instantly to Lady Mane. "It is after breakfast I am most sad," he said; "at that hour one feels there is an eternity before nightfall. It is a time for reflection. One begins to think of life; to realize that for every one of us the future holds only false teeth and the gout. Man's destiny—false teeth and the gout. It is worse than growing old with Rabbi Ben Ezra."

"You are more depressing than Miss Mersey's ballad," the countess laughed. "Atone for your intrusion on my business hours by going to the piano and singing something cheerful."

Mr. Bolt dropped the glass from his eye. "Something cheerful at eleven of the clock!" he exclaimed in his deep, loud voice. "My dear countess, you are too bad. Am I a chaffinch? Am I anything so soulless as a chaffinch? Remember that all great artists have their moods and their hour. *Don Quixote* was written in prison. Give me permission to sing something just a little sad, and I will obey you—as I always obey you. But to bid me be cheerful!—it is like asking me to read the 'Death of Little Nell' to a Sunday School."

The countess laughed, and Hannah smiled—though she felt nothing but contempt and aversion for this pompous, loud-voiced *poseur*. "Sing anything," said the countess.

"I have just composed a song on squaring the circle," said Bolt, "but that is too sad. It was inspired by watching two lovers walking round a

Square. It is dolefully sad." He walked in deep meditation to the piano; and as he went the smiling countess followed him with quick and lively interest in her blue eyes.

"Something just a very little sad," said Mr. Bolt, sitting with great care on the music-seat, and turning his bold dark eyes towards the countess. "Something just the least bit sad, and yet possessing the gently persuasive stimulating qualities of sherry and orange-bitters."

"To make us hungry for more?" laughed the countess. "Oh dear no!"

"For something more substantial," said Mr. Bolt quietly, laying his white hands on the keys. He raised his large head suddenly to gaze dreamily at a picture high up on the opposite wall. "This song," he said, "is called 'Rot'; it is my own composition." Then he sang, in a rich baritone, beautifully modulated, to an accompaniment of sad, religious chords, the following song:—

On Piccadilly a leaf was blown,
Was trodden by half a million fools;
In the bare boughs the wind made moan
And the rain dripped mutely into the pools:
The rain dripped mutely, dropped and dropped,
The pale policeman he pattered by,
The 'bus splashed onwards, the cycle popped,
And 'Pear's Soap' flashed on the evening sky.

O! what became of that dear brown leaf,
When darkness closed on the streaming street—
Ah! life of man it is brief, so brief
That a woman can scarcely make it sweet:

A woman can hardly make it sweet,
And ah! so soon is a love forgot—
The leaf that lay on that bobby's beat
Had nothing to do but rot—rot—rot!

The countess laughed and clapped her hands gaily, looking with no little admiration at the singer, who still sat on the music-seat with an expression of deep melancholy on his face. "That is a song," he said, "that Wordsworth might have written and Niebuhr have praised. Don't you think," he added quietly, looking intently at the countess, "that it possesses, really in an eminent degree, the qualities of sherry and orange-bitters?"

"I will tell you at lunch," she laughed. "And now the poet must be banished—you must really run away——"

"*Run* away!" Oliver exclaimed, lifting shocked hands. "Goddess of the ambrosial courts, I never ran in my life! The old poet sang: They shall mount up with wings like eagles (the first step): they shall run and not be weary (the second step): they shall walk and not faint (the third and highest step). I have always walked; I have never fainted."

He had risen and moved towards the door. "I feel," he said, "all the poignant anguish of the hardened jail-bird given his liberty. There will be for me no sunshine in the—in the Rose Walk," he added, laying a gentle emphasis on the location.

Then he went out. The countess had evidently been much pleased by the interruption, and when

she asked Hannah to ring the bell it was in a merry voice, her pretty face radiant with amusement.

"Mr. Bolt is very witty," she said. "Did you like his song?"

"It was delightfully funny," said Hannah, looking all admiration, while she knew only loathing in her heart for the man. "He seems to me so droll that he could never be unhappy."

The countess looked annoyed. "One can never say that, even of a buffoon," she said quietly.

While Hannah was biting her lips and reproaching herself for having done more than answer the question addressed to her the door opened and a footman appeared in answer to the summons of the bell. The countess told him to bring Lord Kyn to her, and then, rising from her chair, she walked to the window and looked steadily out on the garden till the door opened and the little heir made his appearance.

Hannah felt her blood grow cold as she looked at the boy. He was a tiny shriveled creature, with a poor little pinched white face, and a chest that seemed to be only the meeting of the shoulders. His eyes were large, and looked weirdly large in the small face; his hair was a pale red, and hung limp from his head as though weary of trying to find sustenance in that poor little human skull. His lips were parted and showed small pointed teeth against the white-pink gums. As he came into the room Hannah thought she had never seen so pitiable a child in her life.

Lady Mane turned from the window and introduced the boy to his governess. She spoke to him in a kind voice, but there was no gentleness in it, no yearning, certainly no affection. The boy, on his part, took little notice of his beautiful mother, but studied Hannah with great interest, allowing her to retain his hand in her own, and betraying by little childish signs that he was inclined to trust her.

"And now," said the countess, "you may take Miss Mersey and show her the gardens."

"Would you like," asked the boy, in a caressing voice, looking up at Hannah with a certain light of joy in his eyes, "would you like me to take you to the Rose Walk where the fairies live?"

Before Hannah could answer, the countess interposed: "You had better take Miss Mersey to the Fish Ponds," she said. "You can go into the Rose Walk another day."

As Hannah went from the room she found herself wondering what manner of man Oliver Bolt was when his pose was laid aside and he showed his other soul-face to the world.

V

IN QUEST OF GOBLINS

ALTHOUGH it was the middle of January the sun shone bravely in the heavens, and a grateful west wind floated gently over the green earth. The dark, leafless trees and the flowerless plants seemed to be looking at the conservatories—full to the roof with summer green and summer blossom, as though conscious it was their business to fill the crowded scene with nodding flowers and loaded branches—as though ashamed of their tardiness. The earth yielded its pleasant savor to the throbbing rays of the sun, the birds sang in a joyous chorus, the rooks cawed with summer laziness in the high elms, and the many diamond-paned windows of Kyn Castle twinkled in the sun, for all the world as though it were a balmy spring morning. Even the sturdy stone walls of the castle, overlooking the green lawns, seemed to lose the austerity of their grayness, and to push their lush green mosses more and more into prominence, as if to say, “Behold, we are merry too! The winter is dead; the rheumatics have gone out of our old bones; we are young—young as the spring itself.”

Hannah drew the fragrance of the morning to her soul, and looked about her with glad eyes. The castle stood high, the gardens were in wide terraces,

leading gradually down through pleasance after pleasance, to the brooding woods, over whose inter-netted tree-tops the country far beyond could be seen stretching out in a green stillness to the purple mists of the horizon. Glorious gardens they were, with broad white flagged paths lying half asleep in the midst of their greenness, with thick hedges and stone basins enclosing them, and with stately stone stairs leading from one to the other. Hannah looked at them, at the few people who walked lazily on those sleeping stone paths, and she sighed so deeply that the boy at her side glanced up hastily and gently pressed her hand.

"You will like the Fish Ponds, Miss Mersey," he said. "There are not so many fairies there as in the Rose Walk, but oh! there are heaps and heaps of funny little imps and goblins who live in holes under the water, and dance on the lily leaves when the moon's shining."

"Who told you about the fairies?" said Hannah gently, as they passed from the garden into the wide-stretching park.

"My godfather. He knows ever such a lot about them. He knows where they live, what they eat, what clothes they wear, what work they do—— Oh, Miss Mersey, there he is! Look!"

The boy gave a cry of joy, and dragging his hand away from Hannah's, stumbled as fast as his poor little legs could carry him over the rough grass to the woods that pressed jealously against the smooth, kempt garden. Hannah looked up, and there she

beheld, coming swiftly with strong strides out through the dark woods into the open sunshine of the park, Sir Michael Dulverton. He was waving his stick in the air, and smiling a welcome to little Lord Kyn. Hannah watched him as he bent forward, caught the boy in his arms, and lifted him high into the air. He looked a very brave gentleman. He looked happier, grander, stronger, than when she had seen him at Kyn Station. Her interest of yesterday revived with new vigor. She went forward after the boy, her heart beating, a glad smile in her eyes, an expression there of beautiful devotion to the child which she fondly trusted Sir Michael would see and remember.

"She doesn't know anything about fairies," the boy was gasping, in Dulverton's arms; "but she's nice, and I'm going to tell her all about them, just as you told me."

Sir Michael, with some difficulty, managed to lift his hat. "I have come to dispute your ownership," he said in his deep voice. "Kyn and I are very old friends, and I have been feeling mortally jealous ever since Christmas—ever since I knew he was going to have a new friend."

"You are an authority on fairies!" said Hannah in gentle reproach.

"And goblins, and dwarfs, and brownies!" cried the boy. "Oh, godpapa, do tell Miss Mersey about the goblin who was caught in a cage by a giant, and got out through the bars by biting off his own head. Oh, do tell her that! She would like that story,

wouldn't you, Miss Mersey? Sir Michael knows ever such a lot of things about fairies; but I'll tell you all he's told me—every bit, really.”

Hannah looked up from the pinched white face of the boy to find the grave eyes of Sir Michael regarding her with apparent severity. She cowered a little under the glance, and stooped down to fondle the boy with pain in her heart. Had this strong, good man penetrated her disguise already? Was he one of those people into whose eyes she never dared to look? He!—the one man in the whole world for whose regard she had ever felt a keen and living anxiety.

“Miss Mersey shall hear the story another day, Kyn,” said Sir Michael quietly. His voice sounded hard and cold to Hannah. “We will walk to the Fish Ponds and show her the tiny caves where the goblins live.”

They walked on together, the boy between, giving each a hand.

“Ah,” thought Hannah, in her wounded soul, “if this frail life could but join his life with mine for ever and ever!”

After a moment, Sir Michael, who was stooping to give the tiny child his hand, looked at Hannah and said: “We were fellow-travelers yesterday, I think.”

“Yes,” she answered, meeting his eyes for a moment. Then there was a pause.

“You have not been long enough at the castle to know all its beauties,” he said. “The place groans

under its weight of interesting things. Every wall is heavy with rare pictures; every cabinet is full of historical treasures. You will spend many a happy day there with old Kyn."

"I am very happy at present, and I think Kyn and I are going to be good friends," Hannah answered in her low, soft voice.

Sir Michael had now lifted the boy in his arms. "You must show Miss Mersey all your fine possessions, Kyn," he said. "I want you to like the things in the castle as much as the fairies in the Rose Walk, and the——"

"I did so want to show Miss Mersey the Rose Walk," Kyn put in, pouting disconsolately.

"Then why didn't you, duffer?" remarked Dulverton, with a rallying smile.

"Mother said I was not to go there," said Kyn; "and while Miss Mersey was putting on her hat I peeped out, and there was only fat Mr. Bolt there, doing nothing but walk up and down humming."

Hannah could not forbear to glance at Dulverton. His brows were knitted, his cheek-bones stood sharply out under his clouded eyes, and his jaws were firmly locked. Her heart ached again, and this time with a keener pain.

"Another day will do as well," said Dulverton, in a hard voice. "Fairies do not run away, and even Mr. Bolt," he laughed a little contemptuously, "cannot frighten them from the Rose Walk. Keep a brave heart, Kyn; and now for our friends the jolly little fat goblins."

At the brink of the Fish Ponds, that linked themselves under light bridges one to the other, and stretched far away across the park, Dulverton set Kyn upon his feet, and bent down with him over the water. Hannah stood behind, tall and straight, "like a lance in rest," and gazed, with bitterness in her soul, at the quiet, handsome man whose brown cheeks and brown mustache brushed the pale cheek of the boy as the two heads bent over the still green water.

After some minutes Sir Michael bade the boy steal by himself very quietly to the nearest bridge, and see whether there were any goblins hiding in the cracks of the stone. As soon as the little fellow had moved away Dulverton approached Hannah.

"Forgive the ruse," he said, with a smile; "forgive a godfather's anxiety for his child. I want to give you a little counsel. May I?"

"Oh, please," said Hannah, strengthening her will to look into his grave eyes.

He smiled and thanked her. "I want to advise you to shun the guests in the castle as much as possible. They are excellent people, but—well, they are not good company for our boy. That is all. In particular I would advise you to steer clear of Mr. Bolt."

"A detestable creature!" said Hannah with energy, glad to utter an honest opinion.

"You have met him?"

"He sang to Lady Mane this morning. I was in the room."

Dulverton sighed. "He is the last man in the world who should come into contact with children. He is, as you say, a detestable creature—a horrid, vulgar, conceited prig," he added, with a laugh. "And, Miss Mersey," the voice grew low and serious, "I am so sure that our poor boy is not very long for the world that I want him to be happy and childlike till the end. It is a godfather's justifiable desire, isn't it? If he reaches twenty, let it be as a child."

Hannah, with overflowing sympathy in her eyes and slightly quivering lips, bowed as her eyes met Dulverton's; then she turned and looked sadly after the child.

"I must push on to the castle," said Michael briskly. "I will go and shake Kyn's hand, and then I will leave your sway undisputed—for a little! Good-by." With a smile he raised his hat, and strode on ahead to bid his godson farewell.

Hannah watched his figure moving over the green park long after he had kissed Kyn, and while that boy was babbling to her of fairies, dwarfs, and goblins. She gazed after him, as the poet may have looked down on the scene near Tintern Abbey, when he returned to find that his soul had lost something, gained something. She had never known in all her life so mastering a passion as this, so thralling a domination of her mind. She was like a spaniel in her servitude to Dulverton. She would have kissed his hand if he had struck her. Life changed all its colors and shapes, and presented in

place of its kaleidoscopic interests one central aim and end. A man had broken through her clumsy web of baby ambition and childish desires; a man had come suddenly into her life, breaking down all the barriers of her existence, and binding her soul to his by the sheer power of his own personal magnetism. A man—and such a man! In her dreamings, in all the romances she had ever read, none had appeared before her who so completely embodied all that is chivalrous, all that is strong, all that is gentle, all that is tender, all that is good. The reader, who from the chronicler's weak words has already fashioned his own picture of Sir Michael Dulverton, will smile indulgently on Hannah's ecstatic devotion. But let him consider that the thin impalpable Sir Michael of his imagination was flesh and blood to Hannah, that she saw the light in his grave eyes, heard the music in his deep voice, and felt the influence of his live personality on her own live soul. Let him consider this, and if his experience has made him acquainted with a strong woman bound body and soul to a strong man, let him forget the chronicler's vain words altogether, and now and then think of that woman and that man as he reads of Hannah and Sir Michael.

When Dulverton's figure had grown dim against the trees in the distance Hannah turned with sigh to see what little Kyn was doing at the water's edge. She found herself face to face with the earl. She drew her hands up, gave a slight little scream,

and then smiled, while her bosom rose and fell, and her breath came in little gasps.

"Who are you?" said the earl, in a squeaky voice, blinking at Hannah with his cunning green eyes. He was dressed as she had seen him on the previous day, and as he leaned against a long spud, held in the right hand, he leisurely employed a gold toothpick in his mouth. Hannah noticed that in spite of his rough, untidy clothes, his collar was white and firm, his cravat beautifully tied.

"I am Miss Mersey," she said.

"And *what* are you?" he persisted.

"Governess to Lord Kyn."

The earl cackled. "And do you know who I am? I'm your master! Your lord and master. Ain't that funny, now?"

He cackled and blinked with delight. "You look a very kind master, my lord," said Hannah, smiling her sweetest smile.

"Kind be damned!" squeaked his lordship. "I haven't been kind to anythin' excep' cattle ever since Kyn was born. Are you fond of cattle? Look at them!" he exclaimed, pointing suddenly with his toothpick to a herd of shorthorns. "They're a fine lot, ain't they? Proofy bullocks, eh? All cows in the West Country are bullocks. Did you know that? And what do I mean by proofy, eh?"

Hannah, who knew the West Country well, replied with smiling eyes, that the word conveyed everything complimentary about bullocks, and that to circumscribe it to one definition would be to lower

the dignity of the word. The old gentleman cackled, well pleased, and turned on his heel. Presently he slowly turned round and beckoned the girl to his side.

"What were you lookin' at just now, eh?" he demanded.

"When, my lord?" said Hannah, all maiden innocence.

"When I caught you at it!"

"I was looking at the gardens," Hannah answered.

"Gardens be damned! You were starin' after Dulv."

Hannah laughed her quiet, low laugh that was no laugh at all. "I don't think so, my lord," she said sweetly.

"Take my advice and don't," said the earl. "You're Kyn's governess, and I'm your master. Don't forget that."

His eyes blinked maliciously under the dozen long red hairs that stuck out over each green orb and served as eyebrows. His red face, innocent of all lines and wrinkles, shone like a schoolboy's fresh from the tub, and the tip of his long, narrow nose twitched like a terrier's. Hannah found it very hard to keep that sweet, innocent look on her face as she stood before her lord and master.

"I shall always strive to do my duty, my lord," she said quietly.

"Don't talk like a damned copy-book! Your eyes contradic' you."

"My eyes, my lord?"

"They're devilish good eyes," said his lordship, and cackling to himself he once more turned and walked away.

Hannah returned to Kyn with a hundred conflicting thoughts in her mind. But the thought uppermost there bore reference to Michael Dulverton, and not to Lord Mane. How to propitiate him. How to act so that he might learn to respect, and perhaps love her. Yes, it must be acting, for if those grave eyes of his could see into her mind would he not turn away from her with loathing and pity? She must act love for little Kyn, she must act devotion to that frail child, act motherly affection of the purest, most exalted kind. Through the boy whom he loved she must reach his heart. But if Lord Mane, with his leering, green eyes, was to be forever watching her how could she hope to play that part with success?

"Come along, Kyn," she cried, going to the water's edge, where the boy was busily peering for his goblins.

The child came at once. "You don't seem to take much interest in fairies," he said, a little reproachfully.

"Your father was talking to me," Hannah answered.

"I know," said the child; "that was why I kept my back turned."

When they drew near the castle Hannah looked across the gardens to where the guests were standing in little groups. Sir Michael was talking to Lady Mane.

VI.

THE READER FINDS HIMSELF IN SMART SOCIETY.

THE reader, if he be at all fastidious, will probably give the author small thanks for introducing him to Lady Mane's guests—"flaunting pagins," in the language of Miss Miggs, with nothing to do but "titivate theirselves into whitening and suppulchres." But as it will be almost impossible to move about the corridors and apartments of the castle without running into some of these smart people, the author, with his hand on his heart, begs the reader to put up with their acquaintance for a few minutes, swearing to be over with the introduction at lightning speed.

Here we are, then, reader, in the very midst of "smart" society. Not one case of man-and-wife to make us feel middle-class, or provincial, or dull. All is modern, all is fashionable, all is "fast." True, we have an obese, red-faced duchess with canary-colored hair—who is a race-owner, and can swear more volubly than any stable-boy—to give the party a respectable appearance; but even that vulgar old sinner cannot dull the polish and brilliance of the other, youthful guests. Olley Bolt is there, the writer of pretty verses, the writer of "smart" plays that are acted in certain drawing-rooms—the man no one knows anything about, but at whose feet all

smart people have elected to kneel ; no house can be dull or vulgar with Olley Bolt under its roof. Then there is young Lord Escott, twelfth Marquess Escott, whose reputation for wasting money and breaking hearts began during his first year at Oxford, when every don was blacking his boots, and who is now considered one of the most splendid young rakes of our tame, middle-class, society. Escott is a capital fellow, and rather proud of being Olley Bolt's friend ; he has, of course, been very generous to Olley, but when a man is credited with possessing some forty or fifty thousand a year he can, without fear of being called toady, patronize impecunious men of letters. Mrs. "Bobby" Robinson is in the party, of course. What party could hope to be smart without Mrs. Bobby ? Bobby is such good fun. Bobby makes everything go off well. Was it not Mrs. Bobby who reintroduced hunt-the-slipper into modern drawing-rooms—the game that every smart country-house now plays on wet afternoons ? Of course it was Mrs. Bobby. Mrs. Bobby whose Mr. Bobby is nobody. One has heard of him occasionally, but he is an unreal, unconvincing person of the imagination. There is some talk of Mr. Bobby going to his club every morning and sitting there, first in a corner of the morning-room, then in a corner of the reading-room, then at the worst table in the luncheon-room, and then in the smoking-room—where he drops off to sleep in his neglected corner over the *Globe* that old Colonel Muster is searching for with his glass in his

fishy eye. But that is gossip; one knows nothing of Mr. Robinson, except that nobody ever dreams of calling him Bobby. Our concern is only with the universal Mrs. Bobby.

If you meet a woman whistling a music-hall air in the corridors, be sure that is Mrs. Bobby. She walks with her body inclined forward, swinging her arms, her straw-hat tilted very much over her eyes. She is very strong and very athletic. She calls herself a first-flight man, and is fairly described as a crack shot. Excellent Mrs. Bobby! I meet you sometimes; you sometimes give me a word, and that, think you, is all? No. No, for I watch you often. I watch the expressions that flit across your little, round, sunburnt face; see sometimes the lines harden about your uneasy lips; see sometimes the hunger and thirst of a starving soul in your cold, sad eyes. And you set me thinking, thinking of the grace of a day that is dead, and of your own poor little soul. You are very generous, very jolly, a very good friend; but you have not one single lofty or unselfish aim in life, you give not a passing thought to the God who made you, or to the Death awaiting you at the end. For you exists neither Heaven nor Hell; for you there is neither Good nor Evil. You will be jolly while you can; your appetites shall have their sop whatever the world may say. In the fire of spring you have flung your winter garment of Repentance.

The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter—and the Bird is on the wing.

Yes, but the fire of spring is burning down, Mrs. Bobby, and when the last little flame flickers and dies you will be cold in your nakedness. Then, maybe, you will want your winter garment. You will go and rake away the charred embers to see if by the luck of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego it has been spared by the flames that warmed you. You will search, and you will find dust and ashes.

But away with melancholy! Mrs. Blazer is in the party—the celebrated Mrs. Blazer, the actress whose affairs of the heart (or should we say affairs of the purse?) are the property of every lover of gossip. Ask the journalistic Scraps about Mrs. Blazer! Ask the literary Bits! By Jove, sir, you'll hear strange stories! Scraps knew one of the husbands personally, and Bits once ran up against a little girl in St. James's Restaurant who had been Mrs. Blazer's maid. Oh, those stories about Mrs. Blazer! Bits dare only hint at them in his paper, but if you meet him at "Jimmy's," give him a whisky and soda and he will tell you *in extenso*. Then, then, dear reader, you will understand why the beautiful Mrs. Blazer is so popular in smart society. As Bits says, "She's a real stunner." See her at a charity bazaar, see her on the stage, see her in Lady Mane's drawing-room! Oh, yes, Mrs. B. is a real stunner.

Of course Captain Boot is there, and Mr. Adolphus Solomon—equally of course. Boot is asked because Mrs. Bobby is there, and Mr. Solomon because the red-faced duchess likes him, and is inter-

ested in South Africans. It is, by the way, quite remarkable how Lady Mane has selected her guests. As Sir Charles Orpington remarked: "At Kyn you always meet the right people." Sir Charles, for instance, had met Mrs. Pottington. Mr. Pottington could not be asked because he was in India, and Lady Orpington was staying with the Richesters in Glamorganshire, where, as it happened, Tommy Jinks of the Guards happened to be staying. So Lady Orpington was happy, and Sir Charles was happy. They were miles asunder, each breaking most of the Ten Commandments as light-heartedly as they broke bread at table. Happy, happy couple! To be staying in the same house together would have been insufferable.

But really it is impossible to go on ticking off the guests with all this clatter in the house. They are actually playing hide-and-seek! Not the sort of hide-and-seek old Gregory Brough played with his children at dull, middle-class Poyntz, of course; there one person hid and all sought indiscriminately. Here two people hide, and the seekers go in pairs. Sir Charles Orpington and Mrs. Pottington, for instance, have gone to hide. Sir Charles suggests the south corridor; the lady gathers up her skirts and scampers on ahead, Sir Charles at a convenient distance follows twirling his mustache. Mrs. Pottington finds an odd little door and opens it. There are three stone stairs. "Shall we try it?" Sir Charles thinks it might lead somewhere, and down they go. The passage is dark, the lady is frightened. Sir

Charles, bold as a lion, takes her hand. They go rather more slowly—for, you see, the passage is dark—and presently reach another door—an odd sliding door, like a panel. Sir Charles pulls it back and goes in. The room is small, and does not seem as if its window is often open. There is a gun leaning against the wall in one corner, a mud-splattered pair of thick boots on the hearthrug, a whisky decanter with water and glasses on the table. Pipes everywhere, and tobacco-jars and dirty old cigar boxes.

"We are in the butler's drawing-room, I imagine," says Sir Charles.

"No, I'm damned if you are!" says a squeaky voice.

Sir Charles and Mrs. Pottington wheel round. The earl has come in behind them, in his stockings, a pair of clean boots in his hand, a pipe in his mouth.

"No, I'm damned if you are!"

Sir Charles raises his eyebrows. "Lord Mane, I believe?"

"I believe so, too," squeaks the earl.

"We're playing hide-and-seek," Mrs. Pottington says very graciously.

"What! you?" asks the earl, his eyebrows twitching.

"Yes," Mrs. Pottington answers, a little uneasily.

The earl chuckles. "Is that the last invention of society?" he asks.

Sir Charles, his eyebrows still in the air, makes

answer, "A very innocent game: won't you join us, my lord?"

"I'll join you so far as to ask you not to hide in my room," answers the earl, pulling on his boots. "You've got the rest of the castle to yourselves, I believe. All the bedrooms, except mine, all the sitting-rooms, except mine."

Mrs. Pottington, with the best intention in the world, asks the earl to suggest a good hiding-place. "Some place," she says, in her pretty, childlike manner, "where nobody, not even the countess, can find us!"

The earl by this time has laced up his boots. "Some place where nobody'll find you?" he squeaks, chuckling.

"That would be capital," says Sir Charles.

"Ever heard of Kyn's Way?" demands the earl. Neither of them had.

"My ancestor Kyn had his own staircases in the old castle," said the earl, "and they preserved part of 'em when they built this place. No one knows the entrance but me, and there's no way out. Will that suit you? You won't be disturbed there."

Mrs. Pottington said it sounded too ghostly. Sir Charles said he hated passages and staircases. At this moment the rustle of a skirt was heard in the corridor; there was the distant sound of voices. All three held their breath. The voices came nearer. At last they could be distinguished. The deep voice of the man, the hard, metallic voice of the woman.

"I think it such a mistake," said the woman, "to talk about that sort of thing as love."

"In a thousand cases, yes," said the man earnestly; "but——"

They turned the corner, and came face to face with Sir Charles, Mrs. Pottington, and the earl. Olley Bolt's jaws dropped for an instant. The countess ran forward, laughing gaily. "I knew we should find you," she said; "but what a silly place to hide, and how very unpleasant, too! Stale tobacco, the odor of whisky, and——" She looked at her husband. "You must have been very dull."

Sir Charles glanced out of the corner of his eyes at Lord Mane. The little earl appeared to be quite cowed. All his fierceness, all his cynicism, had melted away. He stood there with his head bent forward, his eyes lowered, his fingers picking at the ends of his coat.

"Too bad of you," said the countess, "to disturb my husband's privacy. We were going to look for you on the turret staircase at the end of the corridor. If you had shut this door we should have missed you."

"Mrs. Pottington could never hide her light under a bushel," said Olley Bolt, in his rich vibrating voice, as the countess moved away.

In the meantime Captain Boot and Mrs. Bobby are hunting for Sir Charles and Mrs. Pottington in the card-room, with the door shut. The obese duchess with canary-colored hair has just given Mr. Adolphus Solomon an invitation to bring Mrs. Sol-

omon to her place at Newmarket, and while they seek for the hidlers Mr. Solomon begs the duchess to accept a few shares in South Africans with his very sincere good wishes. Lord Escott and Mrs. Blazer are in one of the conservatories looking for Sir Charles and Mrs. Pottington. Little Mrs. Pillar is walking through the corridor upstairs with the Honorable Tom Stump whispering secrets in her ear. Lady Skeyne and Mrs. Risker-Champington, on hands and knees, are looking under tables and chairs in the hall; while Willie Dodge, son of the great shipowner, and Lord Alex Raven, son of the Duke of Blackaven, smoke cigarettes and praise the ladies for their grace and agility with a good many very clever quips.

But it would be unjust to let the reader think that smart society is always thus flippantly employed. Hunt-the-slipper, hide-and-seek, blindman's buff, and all the simple, innocent games they play, are but relaxation from the main and serious business of their lives. We have seen them laughing, chaffing, groveling on hands and knees, like so many jolly boys and girls. Let us, now that darkness has set in, now that the lights are bright in the card-room, slip in quietly there and peep over the shoulders of the earnest, serious punters.

As we go through the doors we hear the nasal voice of Mr. Adolphus Solomon crying, "*Faites vos jeux! faites vos jeux!*" The roulette is spinning; the marble is about to drop. "*Faites vos jeux! faites vos jeux!*"

The duchess, her fat, naked arms on the table, one finger rubbing her old red nose, has just slipped a sovereign on to the board. "*Manque*," says Captain Boot, slipping half a sovereign forward. "Thirteen," laughs Lord Escott, pushing a sovereign on to the square. Then you see Mrs. Bobby put two half-crowns on the *première douzaine*; Lord Alex his ten shillings on *passe*. Olley Bolt, looking very black and earnest, slips half a sovereign slowly into *impair*. The countess, sitting at his side, puts a sovereign beside it. This is all done very quickly. The faces strain over the green cloth; the only words heard are "*Manque*," "*Passe*," "*Rouge*," "*Noir*," "*Pair*," "*Impair*," muttered between set teeth, as if each tongue uttered them to itself. Mrs. Bobby's lively smile has gone; Mrs. Blazer, who has backed *rouge*, forgets to make play with her eyes; Sir Charles tugs at his mustache, and does not even think of Mrs. Pottington's existence. Escott is calm; but a man with forty or fifty thousand a year can afford to fling away his thirty pounds without looking as if he were wrestling with devils for his soul. Escott, then, is calm, and Sir Michael Dulverton, who is a guest to-night, and who is as poor as a church mouse, and therefore does not gamble very heavily, is calm also. He merely looks on, or, when his eyes are not on the table, at Lady Mane. The only other cool person at the table is the honorary *croupier*, Mr. Adolphus Solomon, who is smoking a big cigar, and rattling the seals that dangle from his

thick gold watch-chain in quite a professional manner.

"Le jeu est fait!" he cries. There is the sharp click of the marble as it strikes the cylinder. *"Le jeu est fait! Rien ne va plus."*

A silence of death settles in the room. Sir Charles's cigarette smokes fiercely between his fingers resting on the edge of the table. Mrs. Bobby's eyes grow very bright and hard. Mrs. Blazer nibbles her lower lip. The old duchess rubs her old nose, with knit brows, her great breast rising and falling with the monotony of a gasometer. Olley Bolt sits up very straight in his chair, but the fingers round his tumbler of whisky and apollinaris are shifting restlessly. Lady Skeyne and Mrs. Risker-Champington are flushed and hot; when they were crawling under chairs and tables they were as cool and collected as a churchwarden's wife stalking to the family pew. Oh! the little tempest in each human mind bending over that green cloth! Men who might be struggling nobly in the cause of empire, women who might be rearing the conquerors of another generation in the faith and courage of their forefathers! Oh! the vulgarity of it, the littleness, the waste, the waste, the waste!

"Thirteen!" says Adolphus Solomon.

A sigh of suppressed excitement. Escott lights a cigar, and takes his thirty-five sovereigns as easily as an agricultural laborer takes his twelve shillings at the end of a week's toil. Mrs. Bobby begins to laugh, Mrs. Pottington to talk, Sir Charles to rally

Escott, the countess to say something about unlucky numbers, Olley to smile, and—to restore the general harmony—the old duchess to swear. “I’ve the devil’s own luck at roulette,” says her grace; “damned if I can win a six-pence! Here, give me a brandy and soda, somebody. I want inspiration.” Everybody laughs; the old lady’s fat back shakes, her shoulders go up and down, and she gets purple in the face.

“*Faites vos jeux!*” says Adolphus again.

Faites vos jeux! Reader, let us get out of this atmosphere. The smoke, the whisky, the brandy, the heat, those hard devilish faces, those poor strained eyes, glazed like those of a criminal in the dock,—they are bad for us, very bad. Slip your arm through mine, and we will go and smoke a pipe under the stars. High above “this precious jewel set in a silver sea” the stars shine as they shone when Arthur’s knights rode out, redressing human wrong, when Milton communed in the darkness with God.

The dew whitens the great park, where the deer stalk like ghosts, where the kine lie at peace. The wind that moves across the still land is fragrant of the earth, yet seems in its crisp freshness to bring us “murmurs and scents of the infinite sea.” The world is wider here; the very infinitude of God seems knowable. We stand in silence on the old stone paths of Elizabethan days, looking up through the leafless boughs at those unnumbered worlds burning white in the blue vault of heaven, and then—then we

hear the Hebraic voice, hard and discordant on the stillness of the night—

“Le jeu est fait!”

The spell is broken! Let us light our pipes, take a turn under these immemorial oaks, and then creep off to our beds—“creep, and let no more be said.”

VII

HANNAH'S FORTUNES TAKE A STRANGE TURN

HANNAH became prodigiously interested in her work. The spirit of Ambition who, it will be remarked, whispered in her mind as he stretched himself on wakening from long sleep, had not deceived her. Kyn Castle provided her with a large theater ; life here was on the grand scale, and romance of the most intoxicating kind was something more than a girl's dream.

In the first place there was Sir Michael Dulverton. To Hannah every day was big with possibility because every day she saw this god and worshiped him in her heart. They talked together, hunted for fairies together, and exchanged many words over the head of the child who held their two hands. Hannah's happiness was sometimes clouded by looking up suddenly to find Michael's eyes fixed upon her face coldly, critically, with doubt and brooding suspicion. Her conscience smote her sharply on these occasions, and often she prayed in her soul with great longing for that innocence and ingenuousness which would appeal irresistibly to a man of Dulverton's fine character. But it was not always thus, and every time Hannah met Sir Michael the dream that some day he might draw nearer to her waxed a little stronger.

There were other things that quickened Hannah's interest in her work. She felt convinced that there was some strange connecting mystery in the lives of many of the people in the castle. Her first problem was the earl. On a hundred occasions she met him in the park, and every time he would stop and converse with her, paying not the slightest attention to his elfin child. And in these conversations there was much to arouse Hannah's interest. His favorite topic was agricultural, and he was wont to chuckle with huge delight over Hannah's intelligent answers to his questions; but he introduced other subjects as well. On one occasion, when they were at some distance from the castle, he took off his odd little flat-shaped billycock hat, and asked Hannah to guess his age.

The girl smiled, and said he looked much younger without his hat. This was strictly true, for the peer's narrow head was covered with a thick thatch of long, lanky, yellow hair that fell to his ears in what his lordship's hairdresser described as "luxuriant profusion." It gave him a very juvenile look, in spite of the little old face and the red whiskers.

"But how old, eh?" persisted the earl.

"If I say forty will it make you very angry?"

Lord Mane drove his spud into the ground with a hearty sniggle. "No, damn me if it will make me angry. Forty years old; you've hit it first shot. You've got a good eye, a devilish good eye. You guessed the age of that red bullock yest'day aft'-

noon. You know a thing or two, damn me if you don't," and off he went chuckling in great happiness.

A day or two afterwards Hannah was passing through the hamlet with Kyn, when old Timothy Budge, who was sitting on the bench outside the "Cripple's Ease," asked to be allowed the honor of shaking the little lord's hand. Then he grew talkative.

"His father and me was boys together," he said, "and that's more'n sixty years ago."

"Indeed," said Hannah; "I had no idea Lord Mane was over sixty."

"To be truthful—which is what we always should be if we can't help it," replied old Timothy, grinning all over his pleasant, rubicund face—"to be truthful, his lordship is sixty-five and I be sixty-seven, beating his lordship by two, and likely to keep the lead. But he wears better than me. I married young, and reared fourteen children; his lordship married late, and has"—the old fellow checked himself—"our gallant little lord here."

So Hannah found that the earl was not quite truthful, but she was puzzled to know what his object could be in deceiving her.

Two events happened shortly after this which further increased her interest in the mystery surrounding Kyn Castle. Once when she was talking to the earl in the woods, affecting a beautiful belief in the poet's ideal of "plain living and high thinking"—only because she knew he hated the other

extreme—her eye caught a slight movement of a garment behind one of the trees, and she was just in time to see Mr. Oliver Bolt disappear in the distance. She was being watched, then.

The other event was an interview with Mrs. Whittle, in which that silent, hatchet-faced woman informed her that Lady Mane wished Lord Kyn's exercise restricted solely to what was called the Woodland Garden during the time that guests were staying at the castle. The Woodland Garden was near the castle, and in leafless winter could be overlooked, end to end, from the windows in one of the wings of the castle. Surprised by this order, Hannah had nothing to do but obey and seek out reasons for this move. She saw Michael Dulverton as often as before, but the earl never came near her. At last one morning, many days after the order had been given, and when Hannah was sitting on a broad rustic seat under one of the trees telling Kyn a fairy tale, Lord Mane, with a leer on his face, carrying his spud as usual, came to the end of the garden, halted, and called Kyn to his side. The boy was as much surprised as Hannah by the earl's sudden and mysterious appearance, but he went to his father, and, to his intense astonishment, was caught up in the earl's arms.

"Why don't little Kyn bring Miss Thingmegum to the farm, eh? Ain't he fond of pigs, and poultry, and cows, and ponies, eh?"

"I think I am," the child answered doubtfully.

"Well, then, you bring Miss What's-her-name

down there in the mornin's, after you've had a good breakfas', about nine o'clock. See? People who live under windows," he said, in a very meaning tone, never taking his eyes from the boy, "get overlooked." Then he set the child down and stalked away, without even having once looked at Hannah.

Hannah had glanced hastily, but secretly, up to the windows of the castle as he spoke his last words, and there, looking down at them with black brows and stern interest, was the mysterious house-keeper, Mrs. Whittle.

What was this mystery? Evidently Lord Mane wished to speak to her privately; evidently he dared not even look in her direction while they were under the observation of this silent, black-browed woman, who ruled his house. She began to wonder what it was that Lord Mane wished to say: why it was he feared Mrs. Whittle. He had specially suggested the time for their interview at the farm at an hour when that silent matron was most engaged, and when she was least likely to be keeping vigil over the Woodland Garden from her window—to be aware of Hannah's absence. But long as Hannah thought, she could arrive at no satisfactory answers to her questions, and she resolved to put the worry of them away from her, at any rate until after the interview with the earl.

"In the meantime," said Hannah to herself, "I, too, will play the interesting part of spy. Mrs. Whittle, you and I are evidently playing different

games; you have been watching me, and have got the start; you have also got a surer position in the household than I; but I am young, my brain is healthfully active, and I love victory so very much that you will have to fight hard to win. You watch me, you black beast; I will watch you." The result was with the gods.

But there was one difficulty at the outset. If she went to the farm, even if Mrs. Whittle were not guarding the Woodland Garden, the housekeeper would be very sure to hear of it; and then, again, as Mrs. Whittle could only *watch* the Woodland Garden, why had not Lord Mane told her that very morning what it was he had to say to her? Evidently the interview was of great importance, and would occupy considerable time.

In the midst of these doubts she raised her eyes, and looked idly across the gardens. To her vast surprise, in the center of one of the lawns, stood the Countess of Mane side by side with Sir Michael Dulverton, in actual conversation with her husband! It was the first time Hannah had ever seen them together, and she was struck by the occurrence as much as by the incongruity of the noble couple. If he had been alone, the little earl, with his flat billycock hat, his mustard-colored suit, his shabby brown gaiters, and his long-handled spud, would have looked ludicrously out of place on those lordly lawns lying in superb tranquillity under the gray walls of the Elizabethan castle. But standing there, confronting the magnificent countess and the

tall, handsome Sir Michael, he cut as odd and comical an appearance as any clown in the hurly-burly of pantomime. Hannah was inclined to laugh, even though her idol, Sir Michael, stood side by side with a woman too beautiful and mighty for the most presumptuous girl to regard as a "rival." But while she was smiling at the earl's expense, the little group suddenly broke up. The earl shuffled across the lawn to the park, dragging his spud behind, while the countess, with Sir Michael at her side, made straight for—the Woodland Garden.

Gathering Lord Kyn closer to her breast, and leaning back on the rustic seat as though unconscious of everything around her, Hannah began a new and startlingly original fairy tale. When the countess came before her, it was with a little start that Hannah broke off in the midst of her tale, and rose confusedly to her feet.

"You have found favor in my lord's eyes," said the countess, laughing prettily. "He declares that our little Kyn is looking a thousand times better than when you came."

Hannah blushed, and drooped her head. She did not dare to look at Sir Michael, who had got Kyn in his arms, and the cold blue eyes of the countess mocked her jealousy into mere hopeless despair.

"Lord Mane wants you to take the little man to the farm sometimes, to show him the horses in their stalls, the pigs in their sties, and the—— What are the other animals?" she asked, with a little laugh. "Sir Michael thinks Lord Mane is

wrong, so do I; we agree that Kyn is not likely to prefer bantams and little pigs to fairies, and elves, and brownies, and dryads, and all the other beautiful people who live in woods."

"I hate pigs," said Kyn, from Sir Michael's arms.

"My dear little boy," cried the countess, in mock severity, "you must never utter such dreadful blasphemy in the hearing of your dear father. Oh, it would break his heart, it would really! Besides, piggies give you nice bacon—so you should not speak unkindly of them. And so, Miss Mersey, you will sometimes, if you will be so very good, take your little charge down to the home farm, and teach him to prod cows in the ribs without being frightened, and to look over pigsties without feeling very ill."

"Perhaps it may give him a new and more robust interest in life," said Hannah, smiling very sweetly in beautifully acted admiration of the countess's playfulness.

"Have you got an evening frock?" asked Lady Mane of a sudden.

Hannah, surprised out of her senses, answered that she had.

"You must come and sing to us in the drawing-room to-night—that pretty, tristful song about the roses; and you, Michael, must come and dine with our party, and listen to my new nightingale. The Haddons are coming—papa and the pretty Beatrice."

"I shall be delighted, if I may come in after

dinner," said Sir Michael, Kyn on his shoulder stretching little thin arms to the branches above.

The countess turned away, Dulverton set Kyn down on the ground, and, raising his hat with a grave smile to Hannah, followed the tall, graceful figure of the countess out of the Woodland Garden.

That night when Hannah, having eaten her dinner, was waiting with beating heart for a summons to the drawing-room (dreaming such wonderful dreams), the door of her room opened noiselessly, and the earl sidled in, with a finger to his lip.

"Why in the doose have you got that dress on?" he demanded, lowering his squeaky voice, and staring with a petulant frown at Hannah, who was arrayed in a black gown that left the firm neck free.

"I am to sing in the drawing-room," she answered.

"Sing! In the drawing-room! What, to those damned Jezebels, those underbred prigs and card-sharpers, those—those—— Fah! Why didn't you tell her ladyship you were nervous, eh? Why didn't you say you'd be damned if you'd sing? I don't want you to mix with the Babylonish mob my wife chooses to pour into my rooms. D'ye understand?"

He stood blinking at her in the lamplight, rubbing his sharp chin with the long, lean forefinger of his right hand, and looking almost masterful in his rage.

"I will try and make an excuse next time, my lord; but I am anxious to please her ladyship——"

"And anxious to hear your own voice in such grand comp'ny!" he cackled.

"No; indeed not!" Hannah protested. "But though I hate shows and love simplicity, I should like, I openly confess it, to look just once on such a scene—perhaps only to hate it even more than I do now."

His lordship came closer. "I came here to do you that very turn," he squeaked; "ain't that funny, now? And I was goin' to show you the animals feedin', think of that, now! Her ladyship don't ask you to sit down at such a damned aristocratic banquet, does she, eh? I was goin' to show you the noble scene from the minstrels' gallery, the whole panorama; it'll make you die with laughin'. Come along with me, and walk quietly. Hush!" He laid his finger on his lip, and glided noiselessly out of the room.

As Hannah, surprised and utterly perplexed, followed the earl down the long corridor, she remembered that this was an hour when Mrs. Whittle would be eating dinner, and once more she beat her brain for a solution of the mystery that was gradually involving her in its folds. At the first turning out of the corridor which the earl took he waited for her to come up.

"Remember," he whispered, "that windows have eyes, and walls have ears; and don't forget your way. I shan't be able to come and fetch you every

night. It's dangerous. But there are secret ways; I'll teach you some day. There are rooms and corridors in the castle nobody knows of but me; ain't that funny, now?" Then he went forward again, and Hannah followed. At the end of the corridor he opened a small door and descended a narrow, winding flight of stone stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he struck a match, lighted a candle, and waited till Hannah stood beside him.

"Shall I tell you somethin'?" he squeaked, peering up into her eyes.

"Yes," Hannah answered in a steady voice; "tell me the mystery of Mrs. Whittle."

The earl ducked his head. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded angrily, lowering the candle.

"Why is she always watching me?" Hannah replied steadily.

Lord Mane cackled huskily, and came closer again. "Don't let her catch you talking to me in secret," he whispered; "that's the mystery of Mrs. Whittle! Very simple; no romance!"

"And is that what you were going to tell me?" asked Hannah.

"No," he murmured—"no, it wasn't. I was goin' to tell you that I hate and loathe and detest every damned guest in this house; that I'd like to burn 'em every one of 'em!" His little shining red face blazed with passion. He paused for a moment, and then suddenly demanded: "What do you think of me, now? What sort of a man do you think I am?"

"I don't understand," pleaded Hannah.

The earl smiled. "Do you like me, or do you hate me?" he squeaked, stroking his thick, yellow thatch of hair.

"I like you."

"Why?"

"Because your tastes are simple and clean," said Hannah, looking all love and maidenlike innocence.

"By ged, you're a clippin' fine woman!" cried the earl. "You're the sort of woman I like. You're worth every damned Jezebel in this house. I knew you were that sort when I first saw you drivin' with old Criddle in the pony cart. Next time you drive to the castle you shall have her ladyship's best carriage and pair, damn me if you shan't!"

Hannah began to feel alarmed by the strange earnestness of her lord and master.

"You're a woman with a woman's heart, and no paint on your cheeks," he said quietly, holding up the candle to study her. "You look fresh, you smell fresh—you're like a field of turnips; and they!—my wife's friends—they're like a shop full of patchouli. Fah!" He went forward again down the narrow, dark passage, and Hannah, wondering much, followed behind.

At the end of this passage Lord Mane, blowing out his candle, opened a door, and instantly, with a sudden flood of light, the sound of many voices, the jingle of plates and cutlery, dispelled the oppressive silence of the gloomy passage. Lord Mane

passed noiselessly into the minstrels' gallery, and led Hannah to a spot where they could survey the guests below unobserved by any of the company.

It was a dazzling scene that met the girl's eyes. In the magnificent paneled hall, with its colossal colored windows and fretted ceiling, was gathered the entire house party—the women brave with all the glittering gorgeousness of flaunting millinery, the men atoning for the somber color of their raiment by radiant faces, sparkling eyes, and merry, ringing voices. The long table shone with gold ornaments, and sparkled with silver. Red and yellow flowers clashed their gay colors on the white cloth, and shone brightly under the countless pink lights that blazed from the noble roof of the hall. And silently round the long table passed servants in the full purple and gold livery of the historic family, giving the last touch of color and dignity to the splendid spectacle.

Hannah's eyes drank in all this scene as soon as she entered the gallery; but now, as she sat breathless and looked down upon the merry laughing company, with the earl behind her, she had eyes only for the regal woman who sat, not at the head of the table, but at the center of the table—in the very midst of her guests—with Mr. Oliver Bolt on one side, and the red-faced rector, with smooth black hair, bright blue eyes, and large humorous chin, on the other. The countess looked to Hannah lovelier, infinitely lovelier than she had ever looked before. Her pale blue dress, the gleaming

diamonds in her red hair, the glittering jewels on her white bosom, accentuated the exquisite fairness of her skin and gave the blue eyes a new and ravishing beauty. Carried away by her admiration for this exquisite creature, Hannah half turned and whispered to the earl: "How lovely she looks!"

"Curse her!" he answered, snapping his jaws.

"I mean the countess!" Hannah cried.

"Curse her! Curse her!" said the earl between his teeth. And Hannah, turning round, saw that the veins stood out on his forehead like burning wales.

She turned again to the scene, wondering much, but taking note with calmer brain of all that she saw below. It interested her to see the rector's handsome and religious daughter, Beatrice Haddon, among such company; and it interested her to note how young Lord Escott, the handsome boy who was dancing to Oliver's pipe the dance of death, seemed to study that strong, proud face with consuming admiration. But her eyes soon wandered from Beatrice and young Escott, from the fat duchess, from Mrs. Bobby Robinson, from the beaming rector, and the lovely countess to the favored guest—Oliver Bolt. Everybody appeared to hang on his words; every face, including the countess's, was turned towards him. He set that noble table on many a polite roar with brief, excellently-told anecdotes, with quip, with paradox, with epigram, with sheer, brilliant foolery. His rich deep voice had the true note of authority, and his

words were clear and distinct. He looked younger to Hannah, and more intellectual, than when she had encountered him on his way to Mrs. Whittle's room. She stopped in her meditation. Why, she suddenly asked herself, was this famous wit, this lion of drawing-rooms, going to the matron's room? Yes, he, too, was playing a part in the mystery that seemed to be closing in upon her with every fresh beat of her heart.

But her thoughts were cut suddenly and dramatically short. While she leaned forward, her dusky cheek flushed with excitement, her dark eyes twinkling with light, the earl bent quickly forward and kissed her very enthusiastically on the neck.

Hannah turned round and faced him angrily.

He put his finger to his lips, frowned, and then rising quietly, beckoned her to follow him from the gallery.

In the darkened passage, after he had calmly struck a match and relighted the candle, he turned round and looked her boldly in the face. "Why did I kiss you?" he demanded, knitting his forehead.

"I was going to ask you that question, my lord," said Hannah coldly.

"Ask it!" he said impatiently.

"Why did you kiss me?" she said, her large dark eyes filled with reproach.

He came closer, so that he might see her face more clearly, and peering up into it with his pale green eyes afire, he answered in a voice so earnest and sincere that it took Hannah's mind by storm:—"Because—I love you!"

Her heart began to beat and her breath came quickly. "My lord, it is wrong of you to say that!" she cried piteously.

"Why? Tell me why?"

"Your wife——"

"Wife! Do you call her a wife?" He locked his jaws and knitted his brows. "Has she kept the oath she swore at the altar? Has she striven to love me? to honor me? to obey me? Has she tended me in sickness? Has she entered into my interests—sought to learn my pleasure, my wish, my will? Damme, is there an honest man on earth who could say that she is my wife—that she has any demand on me? I tell you I hate her. I come here night after night to hate her more. I'd thank God if He delivered me from her. She has ruined my life. I want quiet—peace—a home. She promised me all that. She lied in her white throat; she told me she hated the world, hated London, hated society; and six months after marriage she was back in the mire! Wife! Fah! she's a child of the devil, and the devil may take her!"

He panted in his wrath, and clenched his hands.

"But she is your wife before the world," said Hannah gently.

"For the present," he answered between his set teeth. "But I'm waitin', I'm watchin'. She has her spies, and she has chosen 'em well, but I can play a waitin' game. I shall bowl her out——"

"Bowl her out?" cried Hannah, taking a step back.

"Yes, bowl her out, my pretty, bowl her out. I don't mean to die tied to a damned strumpet. I want a home, I want sympathy, and I'll free myself—yes, pretty, free myself—for your sake."

The blood went from Hannah's cheeks, she clasped her hands before her, and bent her face nearer to the earl's. "What do you mean?" she gasped; "what is it you are saying? I don't understand."

"You shall understand before the world is much older or she much wickeder!" he murmured, resuming something of his old cynical calm. "Since I kissed your pretty neck I'm more than ever disposed to cast the baggage off, damn me if I ain't! Can you guess why? Wait patiently, you pretty dark bird. Wait patiently, my pretty thrush. Damme!" he exclaimed suddenly; "you shall wear her coronet yet!"

He turned abruptly on his heel, and walked quickly down the passage, up the winding stone stairs, and at the door communicating with the corridor he paused, and turned round, facing Hannah with triumph in his flushed face.

"Now go and sing to 'em in the drawing-room," he said with a chuckle. "You've no need to be nervous now, eh? You can find your own way?"

"Yes," said Hannah, with bowed head, her heart beating furiously.

He laid his hand upon her arm. "Kiss me," he said.

And Hannah bent her sweet, saint-like face and kissed him.

VIII

IN WHICH HANNAH PLAYS A GREAT PART

WHEN Sir Michael Dulverton entered the drawing-room of Kyn Castle that night, the glittering party was in the best of tempers, saving the countess and Oliver Bolt. The countess sat in a kind of regal state on a high-backed, spindle-legged settee, her shimmering pale blue dress making an exquisite contrast with the white brocade of the gold-framed lounge. At the other end of the apartment, brooding with something of a Byronic melancholy, Oliver Bolt sat over a small table. Every now and then the animation would go from the countess's face, and she would turn her blue eyes sadly to the poet, as though anxious to manifest her willingness to forgive the offense he had apparently committed against her dignity. But to all these pretty overtures the poet turned the stoniest of eyes, seeming to say that though guilty of the offense he was in no wise repentant, and, moreover, resented the countess's forgiveness as much as her original indignation. He looked, this handsome dark poet, like a drawing-room Rustum, and, as that warrior sulked in the high pavilion amid the tents of scarlet cloth beside the low, flat strand of Oxus, so our poet, in the vaulted drawing-room with high mullioned windows, fretted

ceiling, polished amber-colored floor, amid the thousand glittering glories of that merry company, sulked in his corner, and forbore to join the war of wits.

Sir Michael Dulverton, soon after entering the room, marked this state of affairs with heaviness in his heart. He had a hundred times rather see her side by side with the poet, exchanging cheap epigrams and making play with all the pettiness of decadent pessimism. To see them quarreling, these two, argued a reconciliation, and, if he knew the countess, a speedy reconciliation, in which dignity and self-restraint might be thrown to the winds, and disaster overtake her. So he watched them.

Some ten minutes after his arrival, when the footmen had carried coffee-cups away, the countess rose from her seat and went over to Oliver Bolt, who was slowly turning the pages of a book of engravings.

She stood proudly by his side, but inclined her head slightly, and with eyes overflowing with tenderness, said quietly: "Will you be very kind and sing to us, Mr. Bolt?"

He had risen just as she reached his side. "May I beg you to forgive me—for to-night at least? I am not in the mood for singing, really." He spoke in a low voice, as one whose finest feelings had been wounded.

"Not even a serious song?" said the countess playfully.

He looked at her for a minute with quick resent-

ment, and for that moment his face was dignified and noble.

"Forgive me," she said under her breath, and turned away.

She stood hesitating in the center of the room for a minute, and then moved to a noisy group sitting in one of the deep window-seats.

"Bobby, come and amuse us with a comic song," she said.

Bobby vowed that she couldn't sing to save her life.

"Besides," said Mrs. Bobby, in her loud strident voice, "the meet to-morrow means gettin' up at seven, and after this afternoon's shindy I feel as if I could sleep like old billy-oh. It's time we put on our nightcaps."

"You're quite right, Bobby," said the countess, glancing over to the disconsolate poet's position; "but there are guests," she added in a whisper, "and we really must have some sort of entertainment. A very brief one, and then I shall pack you all upstairs."

Sir Michael came over to the countess.

"You promised that I should hear a new nightingale," he said.

"Alackaday!" cried the countess. "Will some charitable person ring the bell immediately? I've left my little nightingale all alone in its cage. I forgot its very existence. Its heart will be quite broken!" When the bell was answered she bade the servant ask Miss Mersey if she would come to the

drawing-room. "My little nightingale has the sweetest of voices, and she sings the dearest little ballad in the world. Mr. Bolt heard her the other day, and thought it was I!"

"Who's the bird?" asked Mrs. Bobby, flinging one leg over the other.

"My governess," said the countess, laughing; "such an odd creature—all black eyes, very serious, very demure, very droll."

The door opened and Hannah appeared.

"Hang me if she looks demure!" said Mrs. Bobby to Captain Boot.

"Gad! her eyes do shine, don't they?" said Boot. "Looks as if she'd been kissed by a good-looking footman."

The countess presented Hannah to the very puffy, red-faced old duchess with the reputation for hard swearing, and then led her to the piano.

"The little ballad about the roses," she said; "it is so very pretty." Then she went to sit where she could see Oliver.

Hannah sat down at the piano, and played the opening bars. Then she raised her eyes, and there before her, looking at her with sad eyes, stood Michael Dulverton, his strong, dignified figure in striking contrast to the other men in the room. Hannah sang beautifully and when she reached the lines—

I shall die while they are blowing,
I shall die without her knowing,

she said to herself, "He will think that this is

'acting.' Ah! if he only knew!" And then she raised her eyes again to his face. He was watching Lady Mane.

Hannah was begged to sing again, and this she did to the apparent delight of the distinguished audience. Beatrice Haddon played Rachmaninoff's "Prelude"—every crashing chord seeming to mock the jaded, useless drones in the room; and after that young Escott, desiring to impress the proud and scornful-looking Beatrice that he was no fool, sat down to the piano and sang a comic song.

While this was going on Sir Michael approached Hannah, and talked in his gentle, kind voice of her singing, of little Kyn, and, in a rather mournful vein of humor, of some of the people in the room. In the midst of his conversation the countess came towards Oliver Bolt, who was sitting close beside them.

"Won't you sing?" she said in a low voice.

"If you will forgive me, I had a thousand times rather not," he said in his solemn tone. "I feel—well, rather like a bad bruise! I think I will take the air. The stars are as hard as your diamonds to-night. The air is as sweet as——"

"A poet's temper!" said the countess, in a very low, pleading voice. "Don't be cross any more; do please be kind!" Then she added aloud, "I think Mr. Bolt's suggestion is a good one. The stars are beautiful to-night and the air is quite mild. He suggests that we should go out of doors. Shall we go and discover new planets?"

The proposal was popular, especially as it induced the rector to make his farewells. Wraps were fetched, and soon the moon-blanchèd gardens were spotted with human beings, laughing and chatting (Mrs. Bobby smoking a cigarette) under the glittering stars. Escott walked down the drive with the rector and Beatrice. Hannah went with Sir Michael, and she was surprised at the pace at which he walked over the gardens and at the somewhat random answers he returned to her questions. Of a sudden, as the light of a cigarette glowed afar off at the end of the darkened bowling-green, which was shut in between two thick hedges, he detached himself from Hannah with a hurried excuse and walked in that direction. Hannah, sick at heart, yet keenly interested in this mystery, watched him go, and saw him stopped by the stout duchess when he had gone but twenty paces from her side. Then, walking quietly in among the trees, she made her way to the other side of the bowling-green just as a woman in a pale blue dress with a white boa about her neck entered it from the other end.

Hannah was concealed from all observation, and she walked noiselessly on the velvet turf, listening with feverish eagerness for the sound of voices. Presently she was rewarded. She stood rooted to the spot. For half an hour she waited there, her heart beating tumultuously, her cheeks blanched, her eyes staring wildly in the darkness. Her throat was parched, her brain on fire. She had heard

words that roused the spirit of Ambition from its struggling to shake off sleep to broad wakefulness. She had heard that, and she could wait no longer. She glided swiftly away, and made her way to the farther side of the green. But on her way she paused. A gigantic figure was shuffling away through the trees. Who was it? Had he been spying upon them, or upon her? She waited till the figure had passed out of sight, and then continued her walk. When she came out on the other side of the green she glanced stealthily up the long hedge, and stopped suddenly, her heart in her throat, her hands tight clenched at her side. For there stood Michael Dulverton, listening from that side as she had listened from the other, to the little drama that was being acted between the two hedges. He, too, had heard the words; he, too, knew of the assignation.

She struck out into the gardens, and stood in the shadow of some trees watching Dulverton. He waited only a minute longer, and then turned back to join the group of star-gazers. Hannah could see that his face was strained, could hear that his voice was agitated with strongly-felt emotion. And while she watched him the flutter of a frock at the end of the bowling-green caught her eye. Dulverton's back at that moment was turned to the bowling-green, and he did not see the tall figure that slipped quietly back to the castle, the white wrap streaming behind. Presently the dark figure of a man came from the bowling-green and passed quietly towards

the group on the lawns. In a few minutes, after the eternal stars had inspired a hundred commonplace remarks, there was a general move to the castle, and Hannah came from her hiding and set out on a circuitous route to join the party. As she went she encountered Criddle. He passed her, his head in the air, and made no sign of recognition, and she went on, wondering much, and reached the castle. In the hall she stood quietly among the guests, noticing that Dulverton followed the movements of Oliver Bolt with cold and angry eyes. While Hannah watched, a footman came forward and announced to Dulverton that his dog-cart was at the door.

"Where is her ladyship?" said Dulverton. The man said he would inquire.

Several minutes passed; the guests moved away in twos and threes, and presently Oliver Bolt retired. Dulverton, standing near the high, gray window, tugged at his mustache and chafed at the footman's delay.

When the man came back Hannah had drawn nearer to the great window, and was innocently examining the wood-carving on the panels of the wall.

"Her ladyship's maid, sir," said the footman, "says that her ladyship is not feeling very well, and has retired."

"Can you take her ladyship a note?" asked Dulverton in a low voice.

The man said he would try. "Come with me," said Dulverton, and he led the way out of the hall.

Hannah's brain was in a whirl. She stood by the great window, wondering what would be the end of this strange drama. It seemed that the earl's vengeance was near at hand, and with that vengeance the beginning of her own splendid fortunes. But how was the drama to be worked out, how was she to play her part? She stood there for many minutes, turning the subject over and over in her distracted mind. If she struck the blow it would be a coward's blow, but both were guilty, both deserved punishment. She hated Oliver Bolt, she disliked and feared the countess, surely she might strike. Surely it was her duty to the earl. Why should he suffer at those guilty hands year after year? And yet what would he think of her if she—to whom he made that staggering vow—brought the intelligence of his wife's guilt?

Glancing round in the midst of these meditations, Hannah found that she was in the hall alone. All the guests had retired. She was about to hurry out, when a slight *hiss* at the far end brought her to a standstill. She peered into the gloom of the distance, and saw the earl standing in a half-open door, beckoning to her. She went swiftly to the end of the hall, and passed through the doorway. She found herself in a small, shabbily furnished room, with pipes on the mantelpiece, tobacco jars everywhere, and a decanter of whisky, with a glass and water by its side, on the small round table in the

center of the room. This untidy room was lighted by an oil lamp.

"What were you doin' there?" asked the earl, blinking fiercely.

"Don't ask me, don't ask me!" cried Hannah, in well simulated agony of mind.

The earl started. "In the devil's name what d'ye mean?" he demanded.

"My lord!" cried Hannah, wringing her hands, "I fear for your honor. But after your words to-night—— Oh, my God——!"

He caught her wrist in a grip of iron, brought his face close to hers, and hissed between his teeth: "Tell me!"

She gazed at him as one mesmerized.

"I would tell you," she gasped, "but for your words this evening. It is impossible now."

The grip tightened. "Tell me!"

She swayed and raised her free hand as if to shield her eyes from his gaze.

"I cannot," she groaned. "I could not betray her."

The hand that gripped her wrist trembled like an aspen leaf. "Tell me," he said hoarsely.

Hannah started, drew her hand from her eyes, a smile flashed across her face. "Yes, yes!" she cried, "it may not be too late even now. There is time, there is time! Go, my lord, go quickly—go to your wife's room. Save her!"

He dropped her wrist and went from the room as a flame driven by wind from a candle.

She waited there, her mind in a ferment of doubt. She could not think clearly, she could not comprehend what was to happen. The blood tingled in her brain and danced in her eyes. In her breast the heart beat furiously, driving the breath through her dry lips in quick, sharp gasps. She was bringing ruin to the countess—that alone was plain. Lady Mane and Oliver Bolt would be ruined. She walked to and fro, crouched down in the deep chair by the fire, held her hands to her ears, before her eyes, prayed to God, and praying, dreamed of her future as mistress of Kyn Castle.

After many long-drawn minutes, as she crouched down in the chair, her hands pressed before her face, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up, and met the evil eyes of the earl. He held a folded paper in his hands; the sweat stood on his forehead, and his jaws were tight locked.

"Are you prayin'?" he demanded. His voice was hoarse, and sounded far off.

Hannah nodded.

"For my wife?"

Hannah nodded again.

"Then your prayer's answered. I've bowled her out!"

Hannah jumped to her feet, her heart beating with joy. "Forgive her!" she cried, "oh, my lord, forgive her!"

He swore an oath. "What! when I found her——! What! with evidence like this!" and with another oath he thrust the paper into her hands.

Hannah looked at it with dazed eyes. It ran:—
 “For God’s sake, Helen, let me see you to-night. My mind is on the rack. Unless I see you before I leave the castle I shall go mad. I must see you. Send ‘Yes’ by your maid, and I will find my way to your boudoir.—Michael.”

“And he was there!” cried the earl. “Damn ’em, he was there! And when she saw me she cried, ‘Michael, you’ve ruined me!’—damn her! Yes,” he went on, “and that brute Bolt was passin’ her room, and I had him in for a witness. Think of that, now!”

“Sir Michael Dulverton!” Hannah murmured, looking at the note. “But—— Are you sure? Oh, there is some——”

The girl’s agitated utterance was interrupted by a knock at the door. The earl hurried Hannah to a cupboard, pushed her in, half closed the door, and then went growling and muttering to answer the knock.

As the door opened Hannah heard Mrs. Whittle’s voice. “I can’t see you to-night,” he said; “you’ve chosen a bad hour. I can’t see you—I won’t see you!”

“But I must see you,” said Mrs. Whittle in a low tone of threatening command.

“Go to the devil!” cried the earl, and banged the door in her face, shooting a bolt into its socket while the noise of the slam still echoed in the chamber. “Go to the devil!” he said again.

“Come quickly,” he whispered to Hannah, and

led her to the farther end of the little room. He touched a panel, it sprang noiselessly back, and disclosed a narrow passage. "Go straight on," he whispered, "take the first to your left, and then go up the three stone stairs, open the door, and you're in the main hall. If you meet her, say you took the wrong turn. But don't meet her if you can help it."

Hannah did not meet Mrs. Whittle, but she met Criddle. A footman was conducting him to the earl's room.

IX

BREAKING UP

ON the following morning at the "Cripple's Ease" William the valet paid an early visit to his father. Timothy Budge, having watched his wife dust and sweep the bar, and having himself fed his pet owl and flung the chickens a handful or two of Indian corn, felt that he was entitled to a rest; and so, while his wife cooked the breakfast, the old fellow sat in the sun on the sloping bench outside of the little whitewashed tavern and blinked at the birds in the spreading beech tree. It was here that William found him. The old man in his shirt sleeves, with his rumpled hair, his waistcoat open, his thin linen shirt innocent of collar, cut a very different figure from his smart son, with billycock hat hanging rakishly over one ear, and a plum-colored silk handkerchief falling negligently from the top pocket of his tightly buttoned dark suit. Old Timothy looked up, touched his wrinkled forehead to the boy with a half-contemptuous snort, and asked after his lordship's health.

"The earl's in the very devil of a temper," said William, his chin resting unhappily on the sharp edge of an extremely tall and uncomfortably stiff collar.

"I meaned you," chuckled the father. "I allus

refers to you, in whatever society I may be, as his lordship; says I, 'His Lordship my son William,' or, 'My Lord Bill Budge' says so or doesn't say so." His small, brown, laughing eyes fixed themselves for a minute on the face of his son, and then with a muffled snort that sent his shoulders half-way to his ears the old fellow turned his gaze once more to the birds in the beech.

William produced a silver cigarette case from his pocket, helped himself to a cigarette, and struck a match.

"Aren't you come to breakfast, then?" asked old Timothy, folding his fat arms over his chest.

"I'll take a snack when it's ready," said William; "but I didn't come for that. I came to tell you a bit of news."

"Scandal?" queried Timothy.

"Solemn truth," answered William.

"Fire ahead!" Timothy said, his eyes twinkling as he watched the birds in the trees.

"The party's going to break up," quoth William, resting a brown shoe on the bench where his father sat. "The party's going to break up, *and the family's going to break up, too.*"

"Why aren't you there, then, to pick up the pieces?" said Timothy, with a laugh.

"Perhaps I may be one of the pieces myself," said William. "The old earl seems half off his nut, he do; hasn't got a civil or a sane word for a feller; treated me this morning same as if I had been a footman."

"The unfeeling willain!" said Timothy.

"But you haven't heard the news," persisted William.

"What!" cried old Budge, both fat hands brought with a sudden snap to his knees. "What, Bill! is there wuss to follow than your ruin? Lord ha' mercy, if it be so you must keep it till I ha' had a mouthful of breakfast and a swig at the teapot."

"Listen!" said William, firmly, from the top of his collar.

"Be easy, Bill, be easy," said the father.

"Her ladyship's took the bit in her mouth, and the earl's bowled her out!" said William, with dramatic earnestness.

"Stop a minute, stop a minute," cried Timothy. "You're mixing up horse-ridin' with cricket. Now, let's have it fair. 'Her ladyship's took the bit in her mouth;' does that mean, my lord Bill, that the countess has been an' bolted?"

"It means she's done what she didn't ought to ha' done," said William, "and it means that the earl caught her——"

"More cricket!" chuckled Timothy.

"And," went on William, "it means that the earl's goin' to divorce her slick off."

"Now this really is news," chuckled Timothy, rubbing one side of his old bulbous nose with a long thick finger. "It's what I call a real bit of Society gossip, without payin' a penny for the paper. And, my lord Bill, who is the noble gentleman what's done the earl this service?"

"Guess!" said Bill.

Old Timothy looked at his son with a moment's contempt. "Now, do I know the names of all them darned coxcombs up at the castle? Now, do I?" He sniffed contemptuously.

"You know the gentleman," said William.

"What, is it that ladida actor-lookin' fellow with a glass in his eye and scent on his hankey? That Mr.—what's his name—Bolt, what comes and talks so condescending to me! Lord bless my soul! but if it's him, it's a disgrace to the family!"

"It isn't him," said the son, blowing a cloud of smoke into his father's face.

The old man waved it away with one of his fat hands. "Then who is it? Let's have it out and no darn mystery."

"It's Sir Michael Dulverton!" cried William.

Old Timothy flung himself back against the white wall of the inn. He fixed his eyes on William, and held his hands over his knees with every finger stretched wide open. "Bill," he said slowly, "you're a liar."

William withdrew his brown shoe from the bench, and laughed. "All right," he said; "you know more about castle affairs than I do." He walked in at the open door of the inn, and old Timothy after a minute waddled in after him. Mrs. Budge, who was just setting a dish of eggs and bacon on the table (she had been cook at the castle in the old earl's time) looked up with pride as her son entered. She was a woman with two enormous cheeks,

cheeks that began to swell from the eyes and went on swelling till they reached the shoulders—where they rested from their labors. Her eyes were brisk black, of a quick, restless kind, and she wore her oily black hair piled high up at the back of the head in the fashion of her maiden days. Wiping her hands on her blue apron, and presenting one of her fat cheeks to William, she invited him to take a seat at the table. Then William told his tale.

“First thing this mornin’,” he said, “there was talk in the servants’ hall, and her ladyship’s maid said that last night she had taken a note from Sir Michael to her ladyship, that her ladyship had sent back the answer, ‘Yes,’ and then putting on a dressing-gown, had gone into her boudoir that leads from the bedroom, and told the maid she might go to bed. Then down comes old mother Whittle, looking blacker than ever, and tells me to go instantly to the earl. So up I goes. ‘Pack my bag,’ he says. ‘What with?’ says I. ‘Dam’ fool,’ he says, ‘with clothes. I’m goin’ to London by the first train.’ ‘Am I to accompany your lordship?’ I asks. ‘No, and be damned to you,’ he answers. And then while I packed his bag, the old bloater kept on chuckling and saying to himself, ‘I’ve bowled her out; I’ve bowled her out,’ just like that. Presently in comes her ladyship’s maid with a note from her ladyship. The earl reads it, tears it into bits, and says to the girl, ‘The answer’s No, and be damned to her.’ Then he goes down the

stairs, with me behind, gets into the carriage, and drives off. When I got into our hall again, I found all the servants of the guests had gone, and the cook told me they was upstairs packing their people's boxes, that there was to be no meet that day, and that the party had broke up."

"And do you think," said old Timothy slowly, his cup in his hand, "that Sir Michael, what's been like a brother to her ladyship ever since they were children, when her ladyship's old father, the Honorable John Bladen, was parson up at t' rectory, playin' together boy an' girl, an' he the godfather of the little lord, and so fond of him as any fool can see,—do you think as he's a blackguard?" He drank a gulp of tea, and looked at his wife.

"The gentry are different to us," said Mrs. Budge sententiously. "They don't look at things same as we do."

"No," quoth old Timothy, "that's true enough—of the new gentry, of the people up at the castle; but it aren't true of the old nobility, and Sir Michael's one of them. If there's a honest, God-fearing, kind-hearted gentleman on this earth, it's Sir Michael Dulverton—and I knew his father before him!"

He drew the sleeve of his shirt across his mouth, and looked defiantly at William, as if to say: "And that settles it."

"Well," said that young gentleman, "accordin' to information from headquarters, which of course may not know so much of the affair as folks at the

'Cripple's Ease,' Sir Michael don't deny the affair."

"Who says that?" demanded Timothy, blinking.

"There's a lady's maid at the castle that's a bit stuck on me," said William, smiling indulgently, "an' she told me that she was passing down the corridor by Mrs. Whittle's room last night, and heard some one in there telling the tale. She heard him say, 'The earl asked him what he was doing in his wife's room, an' he wouldn't say, he said he couldn't say!' an' with that he says the old bloater laughs like a fiend out of hell."

While this conversation was going on over the breakfast table at the "Cripple's Ease," Hannah was walking with little Kyn in the gardens at the castle. She had scarce closed her eyes that night, and she was now walking slowly to and fro in the crisp, morning air, trusting to the exercise for recuperation of her strength in order that she might play her part with success in the scenes that must ensue on last night's opening of the drama.

But her mind was racked by hideous thoughts. In striving to gain her ends she had involved the man she loved in the ruin of the countess. She guessed that he was innocent, and she knew that Oliver Bolt, who was in truth the guilty man, must go free. Nothing that she could do, nothing that she felt she could do, would succeed in making these two men change places. And as she thought this situation over, the child of the woman she had ruined babbled at her side of fairies and goblins.

But Hannah's thoughts were not all gloomy.

Last night she had seen the countess blazing in all the glory of her state, had tasted for a brief moment the cup of splendor. Her conscience was half lulled to rest under that narcotic. She looked up at the glorious gray pile with the fluttering Red Cross of St. George on its highest turret, looked over the smooth velvet lawns, over pleasure after pleasure, over far-stretching park dotted with giant trees, under which deer moved in little clusters—and looking on all this she drew comfort to her soul. “Yours, yours!” cried the voice of young Ambition, wide awake now, and lusting for life. “Never mind how gained, never mind who tumbles that you may climb; it is yours, all yours. The diamonds that glittered in that red hair last night will glitter with a deeper light in your own brown tresses; the banquet scene at which you gazed with jealous eyes from the minstrels’ gallery, will be enacted again and again with you at the table’s head; all is yours—the castle with its splendid rooms, its pictures, its china, its plate, its wood-carving, its thousand treasures of art, its endless corridors, its retinue of servants, its pomp, its state, its glory—all yours, all yours!”

She caught her breath.

“Why pine, why regret? This remorse is but affected,” cried Ambition, rallying her with brave words; “you feel as if you ought to be sorry, and so you attempt to make yourself suffer all the idle throes of remorse. You are not, in truth, sorry. You know you are not sorry. Be wise, be strong!

Life is a battle for success, and you have struck boldly, and won. Why repine? You know you want this castle, the coronet of the countess, her place at the table. You have got them, you are not sorry to have got them. Then, away with regret that she and a man who cares not for you a snap of the fingers, have gone under that you might rise."

So Ambition blustered in the mind of Hannah, and gradually regret went from her soul. She walked with Kyn, chatting merrily, laughing gaily at his odd questions, lifting him now and then from the ground to be hugged with pretty caresses against her breast; and so well did she play this part that many a guest looking from the castle windows over the gardens remarked how pretty a picture child and young governess made. But Hannah could always act well—before an audience.

She was, in spite of her present calm, burning to know the result of last night's bold stroke; and so she kept close to the castle. She had not heard that Lord Mane rose early and went to London; or that the guests were packing boxes, and whispering among themselves. She had nothing to guide her. Under the immemorial trees she wandered with her little charge; now resting with him on a stone seat, now chasing him over the smooth lawns, now lifting him in her strong arms to look for fairies among the branches of the trees.

Thus was Hannah engaged, striving to quiet the fever in her brain, when looking up towards the

castle she saw the countess approaching. Her heart stood still. Lady Mane was dressed in a clinging dove-colored dress, she wore furs about her neck, and from the broad brim of her black hat piled with dark feathers a veil was drawn across her face. Hannah could not guess what this visit portended; she could only see that the countess was dressed for a journey. Summoning all her fortitude, the girl took Kyn by the hand and went forward to meet her.

Lady Mane smiled to Kyn as she drew near, and, fortunately for Hannah, did not turn those innocent blue eyes in her direction. The boy clung to Hannah.

"He is very fond of you, Miss Mersey," said the countess, in a tone just a note lower and sadder than was habitual to her voice.

"I am fond of him too," Hannah replied, with a pretty smile.

"Ah! 'Love goes to love, as schoolboys from their books.' You have deserved his love perhaps more than I have." She laughed a little nonchalantly, and stooped down to the boy. "Kyn, old man," she said gently, "I'm going away; I've come to say good-by."

The boy held out his hand. "Good-by, mamma," he said.

"Won't you kiss me?" she said.

He lifted up his face, his left hand still clinging to Hannah.

The countess laughed, and kissed him. "Sup-

posing, Kyn," she said, "if mother never, never comes back any more!"

"Are the fairies going to take you away?" he asked with quick interest.

"No, little man, but the goblin has driven me out!"

"Which goblin, mamma? The one by the sundial?"

She patted his cheek with her gloved hand. "No, poor little fellow, not that one. My goblin has got red whiskers."

"Like papa?" cried the child.

"Yes, very like papa."

Hannah laughed. "You are perplexing him, my lady," she said, with gentle reproach, her heart beating and her mind on the rack of suspense.

The countess stooped down again. "Good-by, old man," she said, with a smile; "be good, run about and grow strong, and here's a little present for you to keep till you see your mother again."

She drew a mother-of-pearl case from her muff and placed it in the boy's hands. He began to fumble at the catch.

"Good-by," she said.

"Good-by, mamma," said Kyn, still fumbling with the case.

The countess laughed, and gave her hand to Hannah. "Good-by, Miss Mersey," she said. "Mrs. Whittle, I believe, knows all the arrangements to be made in my absence. I hope you will be very comfortable, and that Kyn will always obey

you properly. Good-by." And with a little nod the beautiful creature made her way to the carriage that waited for her in the drive.

Soon after the countess's departure Hannah was requested by a servant to go to Mrs. Whittle's room. If Ambition had not been awake before, this reveille would have roused it to broad and alert wakefulness. To be summoned to *her* room! To wait upon *her*! Ah! the longing for that time when this black-browed woman should cringe before her, and wait humbly on her words.

But when Hannah entered Mrs. Whittle's room a meeker and a demurer looking maid never approached omnipotence.

"You wanted me, Mrs. Whittle?" she asked.

Mrs. Whittle bade her sit down.

"His lordship," said Mrs. Whittle, fixing Hannah with basilisk eyes, "has gone to London, and the house party has dispersed. His lordship does not wish you to remain here."

Hannah's heart sank, but she preserved her look of innocence. "Yes?" she inquired.

Mrs. Whittle paused, as if the effect of her last words must produce some other answer, some other expression of face, from the calm girl. After a moment, as if the words were wrung from her, the woman added: "At the same time his lordship is anxious that my Lord Kyn should not be separated from you—at least for the present."

"No?" said Hannah sweetly.

"And he thought you might arrange, his lord-

ship defraying all expenses, to take Lord Kyn to Mr. Brough's house, your last situation. His lordship caused a telegram to be sent early this morning to Mr. Brough, and the answer has just arrived saying that the family will be pleased to see you. Your train leaves at two to-day; the carriage will be at the door at a quarter-past one. You will find the money for your journey in this envelope. That is all. Good morning."

Hannah went from her room, her heart rejoicing, her mind smarting under the matron's rudeness. A few paces down the corridor, and she came upon Oliver Bolt.

He looked at her with scowling brows, and stopped her by standing before her in the center of the corridor. Hannah looked at him with indignant surprise. "Will you allow me to pass?" she demanded.

He laughed scornfully, and said, as he passed on: "We shall probably meet again."

X

AN OPEN ENEMY

WHEN Hannah reached the garden she found little Kyn peering anxiously among the flower-beds, while the mother-of-pearl case with which the countess had presented him lay neglected on an ancient highbacked stone seat. Hannah reproached the child gently for so treating his mother's present. The boy put his finger to his lips, and walked on tiptoe from the flower-beds to where Hannah stood.

"Please don't make a noise," he said in a whisper, his eyes wide with mystery; "there's a fairy here, I'm quite sure; the dew is still on the leaves where she was dancing when the moon was shining." Then he stole back, and Hannah, turning away, picked up the pretty case and opened it.

Inside the case was an exquisitely delicate miniature of the countess. The white skin, with its suggestion of warm blood in the cheeks, looked so human, so lovable, that Hannah felt almost tempted to kiss the fair flesh. The pale blue eyes, with the wearied expression which Lady Mane always assumed when she sat for a portrait, and which sometimes came there of its own accord, gazed reproachfully at Hannah under their fringe of dark lashes, seeming too tired to accuse, too indifferent, too

proud. Hannah closed the case with a snap, and raising her eyes suddenly to the castle found that Oliver Bolt and the housekeeper were studying her from one of the windows. With admirable decision she kept her eyes fixed upon them, allowing them to see that she was fully cognizant of their proceeding. And they, on their part, the black-browed, solemn woman and the well-dressed, sensual-looking man, maintained their position, staring down, openly and without the smallest attempt at concealment, upon the girl in the garden. "They are trying to frighten me," thought Hannah, as she looked at them; and then, without removing her eyes from them, she called Kyn to her side.

"Look, Kyn," she said, one hand on his shoulder the other pointing to the window. "Look at those people staring at us!"

With anger so dark and furious that she could see it even at that distance, Oliver Bolt turned hastily away from the window; and, after scrutinizing her for some part of a minute in silent intentness, Mrs. Whittle followed her companion's example. Then Hannah turned away with a laugh, and accompanied Kyn in his searching after gnomes and fairies.

But what did all this mean? Hannah's heart was far from easy. There was war, and open war, between her and these two strangely associated people. Bolt's insulting and inexplicable threat was fresh in her mind; he had warned her that they were to meet again, and with so much hatred in his

eyes, so much passion in his voice, that she could not doubt of the deadly character of his enmity. Then it struck her suddenly that all the guests had gone away, that these two were alone in the upper part of the castle. Her heart beat with sickening apprehension. Dare they, dare they, she wondered, attempt foul play? Was their enmity of so malignant a nature that they would not stop even at murder? It appeared to her (for her conscience was not easy) that these people knew of her action on the preceding night, and that the consequence of that action had ruined some mysterious plot of their own. What would they say to her, what would they do to her? Brave as she was by nature, and by long cultivation of her will wont to face cheerfully all obstacles in her way, the girl sickened at the thought that she must enter the castle, climb to the stairs above, and walk through those long, silent corridors alone. Kyn must go to his room, to be dressed by the maid who looked after him, and she must go alone to her own room, which lay far from the boy's and very near to Mrs. Whittle's. She might keep him with her and go with him while he went to be dressed, but what protection could that frail child afford? Might not he too come into the scheme of their ruthless plotting?

Walking to and fro on the lawn, revolving these thoughts in her distracted mind, she came suddenly upon the gigantic Mr. Criddle, who was advancing towards her, his bent knees thrust forward, his little

black eyes smiling very hard and looking high above her head.

"A letter for you," he said in his low, fatherly voice; "a letter from Sir Michael Dulverton, to be given into your own hands—by me! He gave it me himself."

Hannah took the note, but did not open it.

"Strange goings on at the castle," said Criddle, smiling all over his fat, broad face.

"Indeed?" said Hannah.

"The ungodly are dispersed," said Mr. Criddle, with great satisfaction, his little eyes full of watery light; "and his lordship's put on a silk hat and gone to London. Wonders will never cease and troubles never come single. Her ladyship's gone, too—for good; yet not for good, for where she goes she will certainly carry destruction to men's souls. And she but a doll to look at, too, and sawdust inwardly."

Hannah listened to him, expressing innocent wonderment at his news, and then inquired if he could tell her anything about Mrs. Whittle. "I am interested in her," she said. "The good woman perplexes and interests me."

At this question Criddle seemed to grow serious; for the first time in Hannah's experience his mouth ceased to smile and suck in chuckles, while the dancing merriment went suddenly from his eyes. "Well," he said slowly, as one weighing well his words, "she's ungodly too. She's never been in church since I can remember; and yet I have been

told that when she was the late countess's waiting-maid she was regular in church-going and fond of a theological argument at afternoon tea. But she's ungodly. Keep clear of her. Do not frequent her society. Shun her. She is a backslider. Yes, you would be wise to shun her."

"But why?" Hannah protested.

"She's ungodly," Criddle answered, as if that should be sufficient, and moved away, looking straight ahead of him, his little mouth once more pursed into smiles and the old dull laughter in his little twinkling eyes.

Time was passing, and Hannah determined to run the risk of meeting opposition from the enemy. She took Kyn's hand and went towards the castle. She entered by the front door, and walked through the deserted hall to the broad staircase that led to the floor above. No servants were to be seen, no sounds were to be heard. A perfect stillness, without tick of clock, held the great mansion. Hannah took Kyn in her arms and walked noiselessly up the stairs, using her eyes well at every step she took. On the first floor she walked swiftly and silently to the corridor on which her bedroom opened. But as she reached the turning she started back, and with her lips motioned Kyn to remain silent. From Hannah's bedroom came Mrs. Whittle, and disappeared quickly in the direction of her own room. Hannah stood at the corner, glancing down the corridor for some minutes after Mrs. Whittle had disappeared. Then she went forward;

but ere she turned the corner she glanced back over her shoulder to see if she were observed, and there, only a few paces behind her, in the center of the corridor, watching her with malicious eyes, stood Oliver Bolt. Hannah clutched Kyn closer to her breast, and uttered a hoarse cry of sudden alarm.

"Why are you watching me?" she demanded, panting in her terror.

"Why are you peeping round corners?" he answered in a fierce and bitter voice.

Hannah looked at him bravely, her heart beating fast in her bosom, the sweat beading her brow. "I spy," she answered, "because I am spied upon."

"Lady Mane was ruined by a spy," Oliver retorted slowly.

"You speak in riddles."

"And you—you lie!" he said, drawing nearer.

Hannah faced him calmly, realizing that she had entered upon a quarrel and must bear herself in it with courage and determination. "If a man were left in the house," she cried contemptuously, "you would not dare to insult me."

"Keep your melodramatics for an audience!" he said, scowlingly.

Little Kyn began to whimper. "Miss Mersey," he said, "I do not like this man. Please take me away."

Passion of the most hideous description swept across the white face of Oliver Bolt. His dark eyes flashed fire, and he took a step forward to the

child. "God's curses on you!" he cried between his teeth. "You, you——" But he never finished the sentence, and, turning on his heel, walked swiftly away.

Hannah went as quickly to her room, and once there shut and locked the door. Then she rang the bell for one of the maids. Kyn sat upon her bed while she opened wardrobes and cabinets, and made preparations for packing. In the midst of this work she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" she cried cheerfully.

"Me, miss," said the voice of one of the maids. And Hannah, with a sigh of relief, opened the door. The girl was a stout country wench, and had always been very attentive to Hannah. So the governess, opening her purse, explained that she wanted some one to help her pack as she was not feeling very well, and the girl, having pocketed five shillings with a broad smile overspreading her rosy face, was soon hard at work over Hannah's boxes.

"Ain't the news awful, miss?" she said.

"Too dreadful," Hannah answered.

"I suppose when his lordship comes back we shall all be turned off. He's terrible mean; it was only the countess who ever made the money fly in the castle."

"Oh!" said Hannah inquiringly.

"Lor, yes. The earl when he's alone only keeps Mrs. Whittle, the cook, one maid, and William, his

valet. He's a regular hermit. And now with this awful tragedy he'll be wuss than ever he was afore, at least, that's what they're all saying downstairs. Mrs. Whittle won't be just pleased," she went on with a chuckle; "no, that she won't!"

"Speak low," said Hannah in a whisper, "we may be overheard."

The girl nodded intelligently. "I know what you mean. The ole cat's always peeping an' peering an' listening."

"Why do you think she won't be pleased?" said Hannah in a whisper.

"Lor, miss, she's made a tidy bit out of the countess; regerlar bled her ladyship, she has. But she won't get much blood out of the old stone!"

"What's the old stone?" asked little Kyn suddenly.

"Deary me!" cried the maid, "if I didn't quite forget the child was in the room. There! ain't it a good thing I spoke in parables?"

And while Hannah quieted the child, the rosy country wench finished the packing, strapping the trunks with amazing energy, and babbling to herself about little pitchers and long ears with the greatest good humor in the world.

"Oh!" cried Hannah suddenly as the last buckle-tongue shot into its hole, "I've forgotten my letters!" She went to the drawer where poor Dick Brough's passionate love epistles were allowed to slumber peacefully, after having been but little disturbed by the woman who inspired their tender-

ness. Then she gave a quick muffled cry of fear. The drawer was empty.

Hiding her chagrin as best she could, Hannah said that she must have packed the letters without remembering it, and went from the room, accompanied by the maid, to Lord Kyn's apartment. There she waited, faithful to her charge, till the child was dressed for traveling, and then, bidding good-by to the maid, descended to the dining-room, where she had been told that lunch was prepared for them.

Without adventure of any kind, and without seeing either Mrs. Whittle or Oliver Bolt again, Hannah and little Lord Kyn left the castle, and drove to the railway station.

It was only when she had settled down in her carriage to make the tedious cross-country journey to Poyntz, that Hannah remembered the letter which Criddle had brought to her from Sir Michael Dulverton. With haste she drew the letter from her pocket, looked for a moment at the neat direction, and then tore open the envelope. This is what she read:—

"Lady Mane is innocent. I am innocent."

Remorse for a moment possessed and rocked her soul. "He, then," she thought, "knows that I have played the part of spy; and in my hour of triumph he sends me this! This note of seven words. *Lady Mane is innocent. I am innocent.* It is his revenge—a reproof!

"He knows," thought Hannah, as the train jolted

and rattled on its way, "that I am aware of their innocence, and he thinks that I have wittingly ruined them both, knowing of their innocence! Ah! if he knew the whole truth. I spied, but on guilty people. I plotted, but against the wicked. I had rather lose my life than that harm should come to him. Yes, body and soul, rather than one hair of his head should suffer!"

"Silence!" cried the voice of Ambition; "he is but one man in the world, and one who cares nothing for you. You have gained the great stake: title, boundless wealth, land as beautiful as any in fair England; this is now yours. What matter his ruin any more than hers? Think no more of him; think not of the losers, but of the great winner who has played boldly and well, the great winner who found the cards suddenly thrust into her hands and played them one by one and scored victory. Think of yourself, of the proud future that stretches before you. To Kyn Castle you came a friendless governess; you will return a countess of England and mistress of all its wealth. The man is dust and ashes weighed against all this."

"But I love him, I love him—mind, body and soul!" This was the agonized cry of the spirit of Love; but Ambition laid a fierce hand across his mouth, and Hannah had peace.

XI

HANNAH SEES POYNTZ THROUGH DIFFERENT SPECTACLES

WHEN we last saw Hannah at Poyntz she was kneeling in the darkness at her bedside praying for the capacity to love goodness. It was a pretty, spontaneous yielding to emotion. Touched by the noble simplicity of the squire's character, by the caressing tenderness of Mrs. Brough, and the general innocence and purity of that household, she had prayed, earnestly enough, that she might become like unto them. She longed in those minutes, as the reader will remember, to be free of that temperament and nature which the actions and circumstances of her youth had slowly matured and strengthened in her being. Rather than pretend to love goodness, she wanted to love goodness; rather than pay the homage of vice to virtue, she wanted to love virtue for itself, sincerely, honestly. Just as there are greetings where no kindness is, so there are sinless lives where no goodness is. Hannah's life had been, as poor, draggled humanity goes, without reproach; but she was conscious that her goodness was only a convenience, that in well-doing she found no abiding pleasure. In short, she wanted to abandon the

part she was playing, she wanted to live. And so, touched for the moment by all the innocence and purity of that simple Christmas merry-making, she had prayed for the power to desire eternal righteousness above all the baubles and bubbles of Time.

Then she went to Kyn Castle. From the decent poverty of Poyntz she went to the munificence and splendor of Kyn Castle. There the spirit of Ambition ruled her mind; she no longer gave a passing thought to the object of existence, or to the excellence of well-doing; she thought only of her own social advancement, the gratification of her own desires, of the possibilities of her position. And Fate, let us admit, tempted her sorely. Cards were slid into her hand that only one who loved virtue far beyond all the things of earth would have found power to cast away with contempt and loathing. She played those cards. She played and won; but in winning she brought ruin and disgrace to a woman who had done her no injury, and to a man she loved, in her own dumb fashion, more than all other creatures upon earth. This caused her sorrow—for the moment profound sorrow; but there was no repentance. That must be remembered: she was sorry: she did not repent.

The return to Poyntz, to its tranquillity, its rugged honesty, its healthful simplicity, might very well have awakened in her mind, after the feverish excitement of the last few days in Kyn Castle, a deeper and more enduring longing for peace of

mind and calm of soul. But *Dis aliter visum*, as we say when we yield to our baser soul. Hannah now saw Poyntz through the spectacles of Kyn Castle. She shuddered at its worn carpets, its straitened table, its sorry, old-fashioned wall-papers, its absence of life and movement. The rollicking chaff of old Gregory struck her as very dull, the sweet, loving tenderness of Dame Jane as very boring, and the secret affection of Dick, the laborious young chemist, as something rather more than irritating. She was like a poor girl searching half-heartedly through cupboards for a last season's dress, and finding that which she had treasured up in her mind as something at least comfortable, not only dull and tarnished, but moth-fretted and shrunken.

One afternoon, when Squire Brough had gone out to see if he could find a pheasant for the larder, when Mrs. Brough was visiting sick cottagers, and Dick was busily perfecting his important discovery, Hannah, who was sitting with little Kyn under one of the garden trees, was surprised to see a fly crawling painfully up the drive. At first she thought it must be some caller, then, with a shudder, she thought it might be Oliver Bolt. But when the fly stopped in front of the door, the man who got out was no less a person that my lord of Mane.

Hannah, in the midst of her surprise, found herself very near loud and hearty laughter. For my lord cut a really queer figure. He wore a tall hat

of considerable height, almost entirely innocent of brim, tilted over his eyes, so that it appeared to rest upon the bridge of his nose. He wore also a frock coat that stopped suddenly short some three inches above his knees; a pair of fawn-colored trousers; and, to complete his toilet, over the little varnished boots were strapped a pair of white linen gaiters. He looked half dandy, half comedian, standing there with a carpet bag in one hand and a large umbrella in the other. Hannah, remembering that she was to marry this man, shuddered, and forgot her laughter. Then gathering Kyn into her arms, she hurried forward, with a glad and very beautiful smile of welcome for her lord and master.

"Stop a minute," he said in his squeaky voice, as she came forward; "I'm talkin' to this fellow about his fare——"

"Which is three shilling, and not a varding less," said the driver.

"Which is two shillin's, and not a halfpenny more do you get!" retorted the earl.

"Ask the lady," cried the cabman; "she knows what the fare is. Ask her."

"Ask her be damned!" cried the earl. "I timed you by my watch, and you took twenty-four minutes; twenty-four minutes at a penny a minute's two shillin's. Don't you know simple arithmetic?"

"I've got a very fast horse," argued the man, "and you've got a very slow watch; and I don't let out my cabs by the minute, neither. Three shilling is my fare, and not a varding——"

The earl drew a card from his pocket, and handed it to the driver. "Then you can sue me for it!" he said; "and I'll have the distance measured, see if I don't."

The cabman looked fixedly at the card for several seconds; then he held out his hand. "Give us the florin," he said; "dang it, but I'm too old to get summoning earls, I am."

With the two shillings in his breeches pocket the old fellow climbed back onto his box, gathered up his reins, and jerked the whip from its socket. "Lord love me!" he exclaimed; "but of all the earls I ever did see—— Why, I give my ostler tuppence!" And then he drove off.

"What d'ye think of that?" squeaked the earl, giving Hannah two fingers.

Hannah smiled dutifully. "If everybody did the same," she said, "how much nicer it would be for ladies traveling alone."

"And what d'ye think of me, eh?" chuckled the earl. "Don't you think I can stand my groun' as well as any of these damned loud-mouthed blackguards?"

"I do, indeed," Hannah replied. "And I wish," she added, after a pause, "that you would stand your ground with Mrs. Whittle, and turn her away. I hate her! Oh, I hate her so!"

The earl bit his lip. "Now don't you try any of those games, my pretty. D'ye understand? I won't have it. I won't have you interferin' in my concerns." He began to chuckle in his squeaky

fashion. "You ain't the countess yet, and when you are, *don't interfere in my plans*. That's flat—as flat as the top of my hat. Talkin' of that, Hannah, what d'ye think of my hat, eh?"

Hannah was looking very sad and very hurt. "I think, my lord," she said quietly, "that it would be better not to talk about the future in the presence of other people."

"Other people! Is Kyn a person, eh?" chuckled the earl. "Bless my soul, I forgot the little devil was here. How are you, Kyn?"

Hannah led the way into the house, and on the return of Mrs. Brough she presented the earl, for whom a room was instantly prepared. "I'm only stoppin' a night, ma'am," he said. "A surprise visit. I couldn't keep away from my boy any longer, and I had to come. Ain't he a little darlin', now?"

"A very sweet child," said Mrs. Brough.

"I never knew a sweeter, ma'am," went on the earl, leering at Hannah. "He cut his teeth without a whimper, took the measles as if it had been his breakfast, and never caused his father a minute's anxiety from the time he was born. What d'ye think of that now?"

"I think it promises exceedingly well for his future," cooed Mrs. Brough.

"And mine, too!" chuckled the earl.

Then old Gregory arrived, and gave the odd little earl a characteristic welcome.

"We're plain folk, my lord," he said, "but if you can eat honest English meat and drink a bottle of

moderate port, we'll do our best for you. You're a friend of Hannah, and, therefore, you're welcome in Poyntz."

"Very kind of you," answered the earl, drawing forth his gold toothpick from his waistcoat pocket. "And I'll tell you straight away I like your house, and I shan't mind comin' again. Would you like to know why? I'll tell you. There's so damned few servants about." He chuckled, and old Gregory laughed; Hannah looked doubtfully at Mrs. Brough. The old lady was smoothing out the folds of her skirt with lowered eyes.

"My dear," she said to Hannah afterwards, "what a very odd little man Lord Mane is. I really never met such a quaint and unpleasant creature. Why do you think he likes a house with few servants? The housemaid has just told me. When he went up to his room he rang the bell, and she answered it. 'How many servants are there here?' he asked. She told him four. He gave her four shillings. 'That,' he said, 'is to be divided among you—a shilling each. I always give my tips when I arrive, to secure good service and proper respect.' Isn't that very odd and strange? Then he told me not to sympathize with him in his domestic afflictions. 'Getting divorced,' he said, 'isn't a subject for sympathy. I feel as happy about it as if I was getting married.' Really, my dear, I don't think he is quite right in his head."

Hannah began to have misgivings about her

future; for if the earl was miserly now, he would perhaps be even meaner when she returned to the castle as his bride. Hannah had a very thorough appreciation of the power of money. To live in Kyn Castle as the Countess of Mane seemed to her a very entrancing prospect, but to live there in semi-poverty offered her no alluring attractions. So she pondered what she had seen and heard that day, and when the earl requested a private interview with her after dinner, she went to meet him with the same dignified expression of hurt feelings with which she had favored him at the front door of Poyntz Hall.

The interview took place in the squire's study. A lamp with a green shade burned in the center of the littered table, and shed a somber light through the large, shabby apartment. The earl, still in his frock coat and fawn-colored trousers, stood in front of the empty fireplace, his hands in the pockets of his waistcoat, his legs as wide apart as those little members would go, and his head craning forward over his neck—the little red neck with its snow-white collar and beautifully tied cravat.

"Well," he said, "what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, my lord," said Hannah, fixing him with her great dark eyes.

"Grin, then," retorted his lordship. "Damme, you come into the room lookin' as if I was goin' to pull one of your teeth."

Hannah smiled.

"Ain't you anxious to hear how I'm gettin' on?" he demanded. "Don't you know I've been away from home all this time, makin' things hot for her ladyship?"

"I thought you were probably so engaged, my lord," Hannah replied, with amusing hauteur.

"Damme! don't 'my lord' me, and in the name of Apollo or Cupid or any other damned god you like, *do be cheerful!*"

"I am sad," said Hannah smiling, "because—because, well, because you do not seem so kind and gentle as you used to be at Kyn."

"Now, perdition take you, but do you expect a man to be kind and gentle who's been for weeks and weeks cookin' evidence to stew his own wife in! Don't you understand I've been worried to death? It's not so easy as you think, gettin' free of a woman when you've once tied yourself to her. My lawyers told me my case wouldn't do; I told 'em that it must be recast and brought out to suit modern conditions. And ever since then I've been helpin' 'em. I got old Criddle up. He's seen a lot of things, old Criddle has. And Saunders the housemaid, and William my valet, they've seen things, or think they've seen things, and damme, they'll swear her ladyship's reputation to the devil." He chuckled and looked at Hannah, his head on one side, his toothpick in his mouth. "Ain't I a clever fellow? Wouldn't I have made a great statesman? That's what comes of bein' born in the rulin'

classes." And he began to snigger with much self-satisfaction.

"My lord," said Hannah, "I love simplicity, I love peace, and I love home. To share these with you I am very willing. Pray don't ask me to share your plans concerning the countess. I can't bear to think that she must be ruined, that I was too late to save her."

"But you want to marry me, all the same, eh?" demanded Lord Mane, laughing contemptuously.

"Pardon me, my lord," said Hannah, eying him sternly, "it is you who want to marry me!"

"Go to the devil!" said the earl, glaring over his toothpick.

Hannah's eyes dropped, and she walked quietly to the door.

"Come back!" cried the earl.

Hannah turned and faced him. "Never," she said very quietly, and went out of the room.

The next morning at breakfast Lord Mane announced that he was so very comfortable, and so delighted with his host and hostess, that he would delay his departure until the following day. After breakfast he told Hannah he wished to see her concerning Lord Kyn, and desired her to walk with him in the garden.

With his tall tall-hat and his little frock coat he looked a fantastic figure walking in the garden with a pipe in his mouth, and his hands in his pockets. Hannah shuddered as she joined him.

"Make it up?" he said, when she reached his side.

"My lord," said Hannah, in her low, unimpassioned voice, "it is time we understood each other, and it is time we settled our plans for the future. I am a poor girl, with no father to guard my interests, and I must do for myself, however unpleasant the task, the work that is generally done for a daughter by her father."

"Don't talk like a copy-book," interposed his lordship, puffing contentedly at his pipe. Then he added, encouragingly: "Go on, go on."

"I am willing to marry you," said Hannah, "to try with all my heart and mind to make your home happy. But I must be something more than a schoolgirl, something more than a dependent. I must have an allowance, it need not be very large——"

"That's a mercy!" chuckled his lordship.

"And," continued Hannah, "I must have a voice in the management of the castle. In the first place, Mrs. Whittle must go."

Lord Mane took the pipe from his mouth, and lovingly rubbed his nose with the hot bowl. "You're a damned little fool," he said.

"My lord," began Hannah.

"Listen!" cried the earl, his voice squeaking more than ever. "Now, you listen to me. I told you when we first met that I was your lord and master. I told you that flat. Your lord and master I mean to be. I've had enough of bein' Lady Mane's husban'. I'm goin' to try the experiment of bein' Lady Mane's lord and master. The other

didn't answer, understan'? And as for what you say about managin' my house, that's damned nonsense. If I wanted a proud, stuck-up, high-and-mighty miss, I could take my pick of the drawin'-rooms of London. There isn't a blushin' virgin among the best blood in Englan' but wouldn't give half her life to slip into my wife's shoes. Have you thought of that, Miss Hoighty-Toighty? But I chose you because you looked modest, because you didn't seem as if you wanted lickin' into shape, and because you've got as fine a pair of dark eyes as any of my bullocks. Now, don't you spoil those eyes by tryin' to make 'em proud and haughty. They're rustic eyes, woodlan' eyes, cow eyes; let 'em remain so!"

He put his pipe into his mouth, and puffed the gray ashes calmly back into a glow.

"I was not attempting to give myself airs," said Hannah in her gentlest voice.

"That's the biggest I've heard you tell!" laughed the earl. "That's a whopper, a real whopper! You were tryin', my pretty dark bird, you were tryin' your little hardest to get me under your thumb. That's what you were tryin'. You were tryin' to catch a very old bird with a very small pinch 'o salt. You've failed. And I"—he paused—"well, I'm still your lord and master. Ain't that funny, now?"

Hannah laughed. "My dear lord," she said, "if you allow your imagination free play when you begin to analyze other people's intentions the very saints will not be safe. I assure you, I love Kyn

Castle for its own sweet sake; I love the farm, the cows, the pigs, the sheep, the turkeys, the geese, the ducks, the chickens; and I love the park with its trees and its deer; and I love sweet little Kyn——”

“In fac’,” chuckled his lordship, “you love every damned thing there excep’ the master!”

“I thought I mentioned the deer!” said Hannah, laying her hand playfully on his arm.

“You’ve come roun’, then?” said the earl. “I like you for it. You see the situation, and you bow to the inevitable. Very creditable. Now don’t you ever try games with me again. We shall get on very comfortably if you continue as you began. And, another thing, you make a damned poor imitation of my late countess. Don’t try it, my dear, don’t try it.”

Then he proceeded to talk business. He had arranged with Squire Brough, he explained, that Hannah and Kyn were to remain at Poyntz until the divorce proceedings were settled. “The old buffer,” he said, “wouldn’t take a penny, though I offered him somethin’, and in a damned gentlemanly manner, too!” That, he explained, made it all the better for Hannah. He had intended to give her five pounds; he would now make it ten. Hannah was to come to London when everything was settled, and they were to be married by special license at a city church without a soul knowing of the affair. “Then the honeymoon!” he said chuckling; “and that will occupy just as much time as

the fastest train takes to run from Paddington to Kyn!"

Some weeks after Lord Mane's departure, Hannah, having comforted herself with the reflection that his lordship was old, and therefore not likely to live long, and, further, having convinced herself that the glory of Kyn Castle would compensate for her lord's despotism, and was much to be preferred before poverty and shabby gentility, came to the conclusion, being of an eminently business-like nature, to be on with the new love definitely and definitely off with the old. She made up her mind to marry Lord Mane, and she felt that in these circumstances it would be only decent of her to break with the earnest young chemist. So she went down the stone stairs to the laboratory one morning, and tapped on the door. There was no answer. She turned the handle gently and went in. She could see nothing of Dick in the low-roofed, lamp-lighted cellar, but a sound very like sobbing broke on her ears.

"Dick!" she cried. "Dick! what is it? What's the matter?" Then she saw him. His face was buried in his arms on the table that shone in a dull manner with a chaotic assortment of bottles, test-tubes, and all the paraphernalia of chemistry. He lifted his face as she came forward, and looked at her with stricken eyes.

"My poor Dick!" she cried. "Oh, my poor Dick! what is it?"

"I am tired," he said, "that's all."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, and bent her face to his. "Only tired, Dick, are you sure?"

"Quite sure," he answered. "I was up all last night."

There was a long silence, and then Hannah, who had come to perform a disagreeable task, and meant to get through it, turned her back to the lamp, and looked at Dick. The light shining on his pinched face showed her that his flesh was hard and gray, that his eyes behind their gleaming glasses were full of a quiet agony. She felt sorry for him, but she could not spare him. Perhaps, judging his heart by her own, she did not expect him to take her words with a very ill grace.

"I want to talk to you," she said, "about our engagement."

"Yes," he answered.

"I think, Dick, it must come to an end."

He raised his head quickly. "Come to an end?" he repeated.

"For your sake, for my sake," she answered.

Dick pressed the palm of his right hand to his forehead. "Why, for your sake?" he asked in a voice that trembled.

"For *my* sake and *your* sake," she said gently.

"But why for your sake?" he persisted.

"Marriage for me," she said, with a sigh, "means not the fulfilment of one's ideals, not the satisfaction of one's love, but," she smiled sadly, "a provision for the future. I must marry when I can."

"Yes, I see. You must marry when you can. When are you to be married?"

"When?" she asked, pretending not to understand his meaning.

He nodded.

"I cannot say when," she replied as one hurt.

"Somebody has asked you to be his wife?" he persisted, his hand still pressed to his forehead, his eyes growing bright and fierce.

"Yes. Oh, Dick, why don't you see it as I see it?"

"And you have accepted him?" he cried, swaying as if he would fall.

"It was my duty. There is my mother——"

"My God!" he cried, starting up, his forehead white where the hand had pressed, his eyes blazing, the poor, thin blue lips twitching with pain. "My God! this is the end! Listen," he cried, walking to and fro, "I have been working for your sake as well as mine. I have worked night and day for months, years. Last night I never closed my eyes. For your sake as well as mine. And last night I found that I was wrong, that my calculations were false, that all my labor was thrown away. Think of that; wrong after all these months! I wrestled with the damned things all night; I prayed to God that my dream might yet come true. But the only answer I got was the mocking of devils—'Failed! failed! failed!' And now when I want comfort, when I want the human being dearest to me in all the world to share the burden of my failure, I get

this. This! My God! it is more than I can bear."

Instantly they were wrestling together. He had made a dash for a bottle on the table, and Hannah had sprung upon him at the same moment. They swayed together, neither speaking, each staring at each with something like terror and fear in their eyes. At last Hannah found her voice.

"Think of your mother!" she gasped. "For Heaven's sake, Dick, be strong—be a man!"

He let her take the bottle from his hand. Then he laughed. "I think I will go into the open air," he said. "I must have been nearly off my head. Thanks for the tussle; it pulled me together!" He smiled wearily, set some of the things straight on his table, and then walked to the door.

Hannah followed him out of the room, and saw him pass through the front door. Then she turned to go to her room. As she went she encountered Mrs. Brough.

"My dear," said the old lady, "what is that odd-looking bottle in your hand?"

"What bottle?" said Hannah. "Oh!" she exclaimed, with a little laugh; "I forgot! Fancy, how silly of me! It's a very harmless lotion. One of Mr. Dick's remedies for headache." And then she made some trifling inquiries about Kyn and passed up to her room.

"It might be useful," she said, looking at the innocent white liquid. "It is the poison that works drop by drop, and if Mrs. Whittle means to goad

me into madness, or the earl proves a devil, I can always find release here." Then she packed the bottle carefully in her trunk.

Three days afterwards Dick stopped her in the garden. "You saved my life the other day," he said with a smile; "I hope you also saved my poison?"

"It was that awful deadly stuff you told me about at Christmas?" she asked, with well-affected terror.

He nodded.

"I thought it was," she said, "and you frightened me so that I flung it away. I couldn't help it, Dick. You frightened me so."

XII

MISS MERSEY PACKS UP HER BOXES

THE Mane Divorce Case came before the world at a period exceedingly unfortunate for the "parties" concerned. There was nothing, really nothing, to talk about at this time. The Government had gone to sleep, and the Opposition could not agree among themselves as to the best methods of rousing it. No war was draining the blood and revenue of the country; no famine stalked with plague through stricken Asia; no lover had recently done his sweetheart to death; no steamer had gone down with all hands; no express train had dashed into a local; no policeman had been kicked to death in the purlieu of Plaistow;—in short, as the old gentleman remarked, opening his evening paper in the railway train as he journeyed home to dinner, the papers were infernally dull.

In the midst of this dreary desert suddenly loomed the little oasis of a fashionable divorce suit. Obscure hints were thrown out that a lady of title would soon make a first appearance on that stage which attracts more playgoers than any other in the Fair of Life. It was hinted, too, that she would make her appearance in company with a prominent member of Parliament whose virtue had al-

ways been unquestioned, and whose devotion to the purity of public and private life rendered him *persona grata* in the selectest circles—aristocratic and ecclesiastic. Then came the bomb. The respondent was the exquisite Countess of Mane; the co-respondent Sir Michael Dulverton. With this announcement the reader of newspapers took heart, and the printer dusted his large capitals with loving hand.

A thousand stories were told of the eccentric Lord Mane. Anecdotes of a facetious kind appeared in the multitudinous journals of the scraps and bits character, and even the more respectable newspapers indulged day by day in apocryphal stories concerning the earl's curious tastes and occupations. Lady Mane came in for much journalistic attention. Her name had long been associated with "smart" society—"smart," as a wit remarked, being a term used to distinguish that kind of society from the "best"—and it was well known, even in the suburbs, that the beautiful countess was severely cut by the Old Guard of British aristocracy. Her name had so frequently been mentioned in connection with race meetings, with house parties where it was well known gambling formed the staple entertainment, with Mrs. "Jack" This, and Mrs. "Bobby" That, and with what is called "theatrical society," that people who make it their business to read Society's doings as regularly as they go to church and pay the washing bill had long got to think of Lady Mane as a

rather flighty young creature, and were therefore more or less prepared for the shock.

But Sir Michael Dulverton! The proud, uncommunicative baronet, who was a staunch and loyal son of the Church, the favorite of the Old Guard, the future Prime Minister of England—here was a surprise of the first water. Here also was the opportunity of Messrs. Scraps and Bits. These two gentlemen, over their quart pots, made merry at this “hypocrite’s” downfall—“exposure,” they called it—as they laid their two muddled heads together and connected racy paragraphs for their readers’ comfort of soul.

“I always doubt the man who talks about purity,” chuckled Scraps.

“Or religion,” said Bits.

“I never believe in a man who’s for ever singing hymns,” said Scraps.

“Or saying his prayers,” said Bits.

“A man whose name gets associated with Church work is generally a rogue,” said Scraps.

“He is sure to be found out in the end!” laughed Bits.

“*Cherchez la femme!*” chuckled Scraps.

“Woman, lovely woman!” cried Bits, raising his tankard.

So the actors in this domestic drama came in for very painful publicity, and when eventually the case was brought before judge and jury nothing else was talked of in certain drawing-rooms of Belgravia, the smoking-rooms of clubs, and the parlors

of Suburbia. It was, let us admit, a case of exceptional interest. A woman, whose photograph had appeared in every illustrated paper in every conceivable attitude, save that of standing on her head, whose name was as familiar to the newspaper reader as that of Prime Minister or the public hangman, was one of the *dramatis personæ*; another was a famous member of Parliament, noted for high aims and lofty ambitions; a third was one of the country's wealthiest noblemen, who—as every tattler knew—shut himself up in his famous house, never mixed with his wife's guests, and drove his own pigs to market; and one of the chief witnesses was a society poet, a brilliant epigrammatist, a writer of dangerous plays, a famous lover.

Then there was the evidence. Sir Michael's letter produced what was called a "painful sensation." The earl's story of finding Sir Michael in the boudoir with Lady Mane, after the countess had dismissed her maid, was told in so straightforward a manner that not a juryman there doubted any longer of the respondent's guilt. Then Olley Bolt delighted the world by the brilliant manner in which he chaffed counsel, and the clever way in which he tried to show that Lady Mane was innocent. But the most damaging of all the evidence—more damaging than the false evidence of the servants and the fanatical exaggerations of Criddle—was the cry of the countess when the earl entered her room, "Michael, you have ruined me!" This, clearly, was the cry of a guilty soul. No newspaper reader

doubted any longer, and the jury, with wives of their own, settled there and then which way the case should go.

There was no defense. Sir Michael denied the charges, that was all. The countess denied them, and added that Sir Michael had always been something of a brother to her ladyship. The interview in the boudoir was explained as being concerned with a matter of deep personal interest, which could not be put off, which had no connection with the case, and which could not be disclosed in court.

The end of it all was that the beautiful countess assumed her maiden name and became Mrs. Bladen, that Sir Michael Dulverton retired from public life, and that the Right Honorable Augustus Oakley George William Rollitt, tenth Earl of Mane, Baron Kyn, of Kyn Castle, in the county of Vedonshire, and Kyn House, St. James's Square, was free to marry Hannah Mersey, daughter of the late Rev. John Stuart Mersey, formerly curate of St. Augustine's, Bethnal Green.

When the latter announcement was made, several months after the divorce suit (and the fountain of the intelligence, let it be known, was William, the valet), Messrs. Scraps and Bits dipped pens into a different colored ink and provided their readers with paragraphs of a suitable complexion. Let us quote one instance. The author, I believe, was Scraps, but the reader will detect, especially in the split infinitives and the "and which" towards the

end of the paragraph, the familiar unmistakable hand of the literary Bits.

"A pretty sequel to the Mane Divorce Case, to be sure! The naughty countess a year or so ago engaged a demure governess, daughter of a poor half-starved curate, to carefully look after her neglected son, a beautiful little fellow of the little Lord Fauntleroy type (all velveteens and gold curls), and this little governess by her devotion to Fauntleroy produced so deep an impression on the hardy old earl's heart that immediately after his divorce he offered the governess, a Miss Mersey, if the phrase may be permitted—the motherhood of his heir. 'Tis a pretty tale. May the coronet sit lightly on the gubernatorial locks. May the olive-branches multiply, and continue to adequately adorn the noble household. Here is love, romance, and sorrow beautifully blended, a story to make the heart grow younger, and which is stranger than fiction."

This paragraph interested other people besides Hannah. Oliver Bolt was sitting in the smoking-room of his club writing letters, when Lord Escott brought him the intelligence.

"Here's a devilish odd thing," said my lord; "that old fossil Mane's going to get married again."

Oliver Bolt wheeled round upon him. "Going to get married again!" he exclaimed. "Surely it's a tarradiddle. My dear Escott, who told you the pretty tale?"

"I saw it in one of the papers just now"—Lord Escott never differentiated between the *Times* and

the Scraps and Bits journals. "And who, my dear fellow, do you think is the happy creature?"

"What was the paper?" Oliver asked, looking very gray.

"Wait a minute. I want you to guess who the lady is?"

"I don't know. Tell me."

"Why, that rather fetching governess who sang to us—don't you remember?"

Oliver Bolt muttered a little oath. "I daresay it's true," he said.

"By gad! she's a deuced clever little bit of goods to catch that old toad," said the marquess, turning away. Then he came back again. "I say, Bolt, I gave your last volume of verse to a cousin of mine, an awfully clever girl, and what do you think she said of them?"

"You say she is *awfully* clever?" asked Oliver. "Well, then, perhaps she compared me unfavorably with Shelley, accused me of imitating Swinburne, and said that I ought to study William Morris." He laughed his deep scornful laugh. "Is that what the pretty *bas bleu* said?"

"She said, my dear fellow, that in your serious pomes you said what you didn't mean, and in your dirty pomes you meant what you didn't say. She said all sorts of nasty things about you, and hang me if I could make her believe what a good chap you are."

"You must introduce me to the cousin," said Oliver, in his grand manner. "In the meantime,

my gratitude for your championship. Let your cousin read Keats and rail at me. You and I understand each other. *Præstat amicitia propinquitati!* Cicero, I think." And with a laugh, he turned to his letters again.

But the face that bent over the table was different by a hundred shades of expression from that which had a moment ago smiled into Escott's. The eyebrows knitted themselves fiercely above the nose, the lips were drawn inward, the eyes were dull with rage and hatred of the most horrible kind. Now and then the lids would unconsciously draw back from the eyeballs, so that the glaring expression became intensified; at another they would droop towards the lower lid, almost curtaining the scowling dull eyes. And there he sat over the table muttering angry words in his throat, while members of the club came laughing into the room from lunch, and guests were told to look in his direction—at the poet Oliver Bolt.

The result of Oliver Bolt's meditation on the news he had received from Escott was a letter to Mrs. Whittle—a long letter, very carefully worded, and more frequently underlined than was pleasing to Oliver's fastidious taste. That done he went with Lord Escott to a commission agent in St. James's Street, put twenty pounds on a horse that was running that day, at four o'clock returned to the club, and spent an hour or two in writing more letters. He was writing letters when Escott again interrupted him. "Cursed bad luck, Bolt,"

said his lordship; "our crock hobbled in fourth." Oliver Bolt's face became grayer, but he laughed his loud deep laugh. "The fortune of war, my dear marquess! Are you going to Carpatti's to-night? A little baccarat, will cheer you up."

It was shortly after this conversation that Hannah received a letter from the earl, telling her to bring Kyn up to London, and make arrangements to stay a few days with her mother, who occupied rooms in the neighborhood of Clapham. This, Hannah knew, was the ringing of her marriage bells. "What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!" she exclaimed, setting her teeth. And then she sat down to think.

Spring was in the air. Only the great sturdy oaks stretched bare limbs to the tender blue sky. Virgin green hung everywhere else in a merry joyousness—over the river that ran with a happy song through the park, over the flower-beds gay with crocus and snowdrops, and over the lush meadows where little fleecy lambs trotted by their mothers' sides and calves curled themselves up in comfortable peace. The wind was gentle and kind: the song of birds rose from every copse and hedgerow. It was spring: the earth's palingenesis. Life seemed good and the world very pleasant. The sorrowful days of winter were past and over. The season of introspection was rolled away. It was now a time of holiday, a time to enjoy God's good gifts and be thankful.

Hannah, looking out of her window upon Poyntz

Park, upon the green trees and the reviving herb, felt no joy, no gladness. She pressed her hands upon the broad window-sill, and with set teeth looked out upon the earth. She was to be married. In a few days the irrevocable step would be taken; she would be married to an old man for whom she could not even feel indifference, while her heart hungered for the affection of another, a man who seemed to her the mirror of chivalry, the flower of bravery.

"Now what is it I feel?" said Hannah to herself. "I am not happy, but to abandon the earl would make me more than unhappy. I want the pomp and power of Kyn Castle; yes, I want that very badly. Some day—perhaps very soon—I shall be sole mistress of all its glory, and all its wealth. My lord and master is old; I am still young. Yes, I may reasonably hope some day to be sole mistress of Kyn Castle. But before that day arrives I shall have to endure much. My castle will be my prison; Mrs. Whittle my jailer; the earl the unapproachable governor. I shall have the garden to wander in, the park to range over—but my only companion will be the child. The child! Some day, perhaps, my own children!" She shuddered violently. "Some day, perhaps, my own children! How I shall hate them, how I shall loathe them! My children; his children!"

She turned away from the window and began pacing slowly to and fro.

"If Dulverton had but loved me!" she cried.

"There would have been no tragedy then, no ruin of his career. And I—oh, God, how happy I should be!"

She went to a writing-case, unlocked it, and drew out a folded sheet of paper.

"Lady Mane is innocent," she read; "I am innocent."

"When I read that," she muttered, "I feel as if my love for him had turned to an enduring hate. But the love always returns. And yet, the reproof of it! There may be a threat in it, too; a threat more likely to affect my future than the boast of Lady Mane's real lover. I wonder if that is a threat! He must hate me very badly. When he realizes as the days go by that his career is ruined that hate will deepen, it will lose its noble repression, it will seek revenge. And he is to be my neighbor at Kyn; our estates touch—his and mine!"

She folded the paper, replaced it in the case, and then, her mind craving for some definite action, she began to make preparations for packing.

She opened her trunk and took out one by one the things that lay there. At the bottom of the trunk she came upon Richard Brough's poison.

"Odd!" she exclaimed, "that this little bottle should make its appearance just now. I had forgotten its existence! I wonder what it means to me, this poison? It is, in some mysterious way, bound up with my life; Fate thrust it into my hands, as he has thrust every card I have so far

played in my little game with the world. Well, I will keep this. If my jailer maddens me, or the governor of the prison ill-treats me, or Oliver Bolt carries out his threat, or Sir Michael declares war upon me, here, in this little bottle, I have a way of escape."

She laid the bottle on the bed—on the very spot where but over a year ago she had prayed to God for the capacity to desire goodness—and continued her packing.

XIII

REVEALS LORD MANE IN A RELIGIOUS MOOD.

IT is now the author's pleasure to present the reader to as brisk a matron as ever wore flannel petticoat. The lady is Mrs. Mersey, relict of the late Rev. John Stuart Mersey, sometime curate of St. Augustine's, Bethnal Green. Reader, I beg you make a very low bow.

Mrs. Mersey was one of those happy, light-hearted women who, when they write letters to friends or children, always convey the impression that they are narrow-minded Puritans. The reader probably remembers plenty of the kind. Most of us who have been blest with merry, brave-hearted mothers can remember the long religious exhortations that reached us at school, and set us wondering what they were all about, and whether our beloved mother was ill. The only time when such people are solemn is when they are writing letters or when they are at their prayers; and, be sure, their gaiety is none the worse for those prayers any more than their prayers are worse for their gaiety.

But it is time to draw our lady's picture. Under five feet, and broad out of all proportion, Mrs. Mersey was what one could call a chubby little

woman. Her breast was deep, her lips were wide, her arms were fat, and her cheeks were plump. As for her face, one never thought of the features when resting one's eyes there—*resting* the eyes there, mark you. For to look into that beaming, good-natured face was, of very truth, a rest for the mind. One felt better for looking, certainly happier. One liked the merriment in the little round brown eyes; one liked, too, the plump cheeks puckered by laughter; the lips that parted in wide smiles and disclosed pretty pearly teeth that seemed to be laughing too; and, perhaps as well as anything else, one liked the jolly double chin that gave the little woman such a comfortable, motherly and reposeful look.

Hannah broke the news to Mrs. Mersey on the afternoon after her arrival in London. Kyn was down with the landlady telling her about the fairies at the castle, and Mrs. Mersey was reclining in a very upright fashion on the straight-backed horse-hair sofa, with her funny little legs stuck straight out, her feet full twenty inches short of the end. Hannah leaned against the mantelpiece.

"Have you heard any rumors about Lord Mane, mother?" she began.

"Heaven bless the child!" cried Mrs. Mersey, "but who is to tell me all the gossip about noble-men? Until you went to live with that wicked, shameful, poor dear of a countess I don't think name of peer or peeress ever crossed my lips."

"Well, mother, I've got something interesting

to tell you about Lord Mane," she said very quietly.

Mrs. Mersey brought her feet with a flop to the ground, sat on the extreme edge of the sofa, and pointed a finger at her daughter. "You don't mean to tell me," she said, "that he wants you to marry him?"

Hannah nodded.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey, getting on her feet and walking to Hannah, "if this isn't the most extraordinary thing that ever happened!" She said this in a grandly impressive manner, as if Noah's escape in the ark, the building of the Pyramids, and the growth of the British Empire, were as nothing in comparison with her daughter's intelligence. "And I had an idea it might happen. Tell me," she went on, "how it happened, and what he's like, and when it's to be?"

"He's as ugly as a fox, to begin with," said Hannah.

"Well, my dear, you can't expect good looks to go with a coronet. We must be grateful for what we get. But, Hannah—is it, is it really true?"

Hannah nodded.

"I never did!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey. "To think that you, standing there in that shabby brown frock, without a diamond or ring from your bun to the foot of your cotton stocking, should be, to all intents and purposes, a countess! A countess!"

Hannah smiled. "The worst of it is," she said, "I can't make up my mind whether I want to be a

countess or not. Tell me, mother, what would you do?"

"Do?" cried Mrs. Mersey; "do? Why, I'd marry an earl if he hadn't an eye in his head or a penny in the bank. It would be tempting Providence to refuse. Refuse! Why, doesn't the very idea of refusing an earl strike you as comical?" She burst out laughing. "It's like a poor wretched sinner being offered heaven and saying he'd rather not."

"Wait till you see him," said Hannah. "He's old, he's ugly, he's mean, he's little, he's——"

"He's an earl, my dear!" put in the mother; "and a nobleman can afford to be anything he likes. If he's old, so was Methuselah; if he's little, so was Napoleon Bonaparte; if he's ugly, so was Caliban. That's nothing to do with it. The thing is, he's an earl, you're a governess, and it's a chance you'll never get again if you live to be a thousand and one."

Mrs. Mersey's eloquence was interrupted by the opening of the door. Mother and daughter, standing by the fireplace, turned hastily around. It was Kyn who entered the room first; after him came the earl.

"Here's papa," said Kyn.

"Well, Hannah!" cried Mrs. Mersey, almost in the same breath, "you didn't exaggerate!"

"Eh?" said the earl.

Mrs. Mersey, whose face was now flushed, and whose eyes were shining, met the old man with a

frank, open expression, and extended her hand with all the goodwill in the world.

"My daughter was just saying that of all the kind-hearted-looking men in the world your lordship was the first, the very first; and now let me welcome you to these rooms. I'm proud to see you, my lord," she continued, giving him her fat hand. "I'm not going to pretend that I have earls and chamberlains and sheriffs calling here every day in the week. You're the first nobleman I've ever seen, certainly the very first whose hand I've had the presumption to touch, and I'm as proud as a peacock to entertain you, that I am!"

"You don't look like a peacock, but it's very kind of you," said his lordship; "very kind of you indeed to feel like one. And now, perhaps, you will allow me to kiss your daughter. She and I are going to get married; ain't that funny, now?"

He disengaged his hand from Mrs. Mersey's grasp, and opened his arms to Hannah. "Hug me!" he said. "No, no, not like that; a good squeeze-the-breath-out-of-you hug. One wants it, livin' in this damned city. I feel as if I hadn't a frien' in the worl'. I'm homesick, ma'am," he said, turning to the smiling Mrs. Mersey, "an' when a man's homesick he wants as much coddlin' as a colt with the strangles."

Mrs. Mersey was surprised out of her senses by the sudden change in Hannah's manner. In place of the sullen indifference of a minute ago there now shone in the girl's face the very radiance of

happiness. She actually put her two hands to the earl's cheeks, tilted up his face, and kissed him, with a little cooing laugh, on the tip of his pointed red nose. "He shan't be homesick any longer," she murmured; "he shall be petted and fussed over; he shall sit in this horrid, ugly armchair, put his pretty little varnished boots on this plum-pudding footstool, and tea and buttered toast shall be served to him in lodging-house china!"

"Ain't she a little bird?" chuckled his lordship, winking at Mrs. Mersey. "Why, if the late Countess of Mane had played the fool with me like that once every six months, she might be Countess of Mane still."

"Don't talk about her!" murmured Hannah.

"Not talk about my widow—my late lamented! Now, that's unreasonable. Ain't it unreasonable, Mrs. Mersey? And now, where's the tea an' buttered toast?"

Tea was ordered, and the party appeared to be in a very jovial state of mind.

"It's done you good, my lord, coming down here," said Mrs. Mersey. "You look a different man altogether. You want company, I can see, and it's in big places like London, more than anywhere else, that you feel the need of human society."

"I feel," said my lord, "like a boy. There, that's the fac', ma'am; I feel like a boy."

"And you look years younger than when you first came in through that door!" cried Mrs. Mer-

sey. "A man with a good heart like yours—to think of me addressing a nobleman like this! but say it I must and will—a man with a big, kind heart like yours wants a woman to fuss round him, and in Hannah you've got the very girl to make you feel a boy for the rest of your born days."

"She's a little bird, is the countess," chuckled the earl. "Fancy her being Countess of Mane, now! Damme, if it isn't a good joke!"

Hannah laughed gaily.

"Well, I don't see where the joke comes in," said Mrs. Mersey stoutly. "If you want a true woman, a pure woman, an upright woman, a Christian, God-fearing woman, you've got her in my husband's daughter. And if that's a joke, I'm a Chinese mandarin on a teapot. Not but that I'm fully conscious of the honor. No one is prouder than I of the British aristocracy; and to see you here, and to keep on repeating to myself: He's one of the peerage, and can sit in the House of Lords, and we pray for him twice every Sunday in every church in England—gives me, and I'm not ashamed to own it, a feeling of pride that I wouldn't exchange for a new bonnet."

The earl sniggered. "Damn me," he said, "if you aren't an honest woman!"

At this point tea was brought in, and the entire tray nearly came to grief ere it found refuge on the table, owing to the landlady's extreme agitation at being in the same room with a nobleman. Mrs. Mersey presided over the cups. Kyn sat at the

table by her side; and, while Lord Mane leaned back in the armchair, Hannah, coiled up on the ground at his feet, handed him the dishes from the table.

"So my Hannah's a religious woman, is she?" squeaked the earl.

"I can answer for that," answered Mrs. Mersey.

"Can you, now?" said his lordship.

"She's her father's daughter—as like him in face as one toothbrush is like another. He was a poet and musician, as well as a clergyman, and romantic to the tips of his boots. He went down to the East End of London, my lord, because he felt it was the most difficult work he could get. He gave away our few shillings to the poor, lived like a hermit, and died broken-hearted before he was forty. If ever there was a Christian martyr John Stuart Mersey was one."

"You're gettin' depressin'," complained his lordship. "I don't want to be depressed; I want to be cheered up. Can't you talk about religion without gettin' dismal?"

"Ah! there you have it!" cried the good lady, smiling. "That's what *I* always say, why on earth be miserable when you're talking about religion? Laughter is part of life, merriment is part of life, and religion is part of life. You might as well try to separate the poles, or twins, or a pair of stays."

"Tell me about Hannah's religion!" said the earl.

"She can speak for herself," Mrs. Mersey an-

swered. "Tell him, Hannah, what I taught you from the time you first began to talk."

Hannah turned round and looked up into her lord's face. She rested one elbow on his knee, and propped her face in the cup of her hand. "Shall I tell you?" she asked in her beautiful voice.

"Yes," said my lord, with his mouth full of buttered toast.

"I was taught to have implicit faith in Providence; never to worry about the future; never to complain in hours of trouble and distress. I was taught to pray night and day, to go to church twice on Sundays, to read my Bible in the morning and in the evening; and I was also taught that religion was a matter of the heart, that the brain did not enter into it at all, and that all forms and ceremonies, which took one's thought from the inwardness of religion, were—were——"

"Of the devil," said Mrs. Mersey. "There, my lord," she exclaimed triumphantly; that was the training we gave our little ewe lamb. And now let me give you another cup of tea. Oh, yes, you will; there's plenty in the teapot, and I've drained off the leaves, so you won't get poisoned. Come along now; it will do you good."

To Hannah's surprise the earl gave way. "I'll tell you," he said, "what I've been thinkin'. Only one lump of sugar, ma'am; the last cup had two, an' it made me feel sick. I've been thinkin', while I've been sittin' here, that I haven't felt so happy for years——"

"There now!" cried Mrs. Mersey, bringing the cup to his lordship with a radiant face. "There! I knew exactly how it would be. You've been a neglected man for years, and your heart's crying out for love and sympathy just like a baby waking out of its sleep and wanting its bottle."

"That may be true," squeaked the earl, "but, damme, I wish you wouldn't interrupt'. If I haven't been used to sympathy, I haven't been used to interruption either. You broke in just when I was makin' a confession, and you might just as well try an' poach an egg in the family way as interrupt' a man when he's talkin' about his soul an' his heart an' all that!"

Hannah raised her hand and patted his cheek. "He shan't be interrupted any more, bless his confessing little heart!" she murmured.

"My lord," cried Mrs. Mersey, "I would sooner eat dry bread for the rest of my days than give you pain. It was love for you that made me interrupt. The joy of seeing you sitting there so happy and comfortable with my own flesh and blood leaning so familiarly on your knee, was more than my old heart could bear."

The earl rubbed his nose with his teaspoon and winked at the old lady. "All right," he said, "I'm not angry, only oblige me by bitin' your tongue till I've finished." Then he gave Hannah his empty teacup, dived into the pocket of his little frock coat, and brought forth a well-blackened briar pipe and a pouch of tobacco. Leisurely filling his pipe

he began again: "I feel happy; I feel a better man; I feel religious. Hannah, give me a match. It's boyhood again, an' damme, I like it. I like feelin' religious, an' I don't care who knows it. An' now I'll tell you somethin'. It's cost me a pretty penny, gettin' rid of my late lamented, a pretty penny, an' no mistake about it. But I feel religious an' benevolent, an' I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get into the tramcar an' go into London, an' we'll have a nice little dinner in one of the restaurants, an' I'll pay the bill, damn me if I won't! Now, what do you think of that?"

Mother and daughter expressed gratitude and hurried off to prepare for the jaunt. Lord Mane, puffing at his pipe, turned his head and looked at his son.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello!" said Kyn softly.

"Come here," said Lord Mane. Kyn came round the table and stood in front of his father.

"How do you like Miss Mersey?" whispered his lordship.

"I like her very much."

"More than your mother, don't you, eh?"

"I don't know. I never see mother. She's always doing something else."

"An', I say, Kyn, old boy, how do you like the old gell—you know, Hannah's mother? Is she always cheerful, eh?"

"Yes," said Kyn. "I'm very fond of Mrs. Mersey. She's so happy, and she makes me laugh."

"She's the right sort, eh?"

"Yes," said Kyn.

"An', Kyn, does the old gell have prayers here?"

The boy nodded.

"What! night an' mornin' too?"

"Yes; long in the mornings and short in the evenings."

"She does, does she!" chuckled the old man with great satisfaction. Then he studied his son intently. "An' how's old Kyn?" he exclaimed cheerfully. "You ain't lookin' tip-top, old man; you don't grow much either, do you? Are you happy, old fellow?"

"Yes, father, I think so. I like the castle best; I shall be glad to get back."

Lord Mane screwed his little hand into the pocket of his fawn-colored trousers and pulled out a handful of silver. "Look here, Kyn," he said, "there's a two-bob piece for you."

Kyn looked at the money for a minute, and then he raised his eyes to his father's. "What's it for?" he said.

XIV

IN WHICH LORD MANE'S RELIGIOUS MOOD RECEIVES A VIOLENT CHECK

WHEN Mrs. Mersey and her daughter re-entered the sitting-room both were smiling happily, evidently in the very highest spirits. Hannah was almost sincerely happy. During the operation of hat-pinning and jacket-buttoning Mrs. Mersey had given the countess-elect her idea of the bridegroom. "Ugly!" she exclaimed; "why's he's a perfect little gem! The dearest little soul that ever wore human flesh. I'd marry that man if he wasn't an earl, if he hadn't got a halfpenny to bless himself with. I'd marry him if he was a curate in the slums or a bank clerk on a stool, or a 'bus conductor punching tickets. He's a little gem. Mark my words, that man's got the noblest of hearts; properly treated he'll make a perfect husband. Ugly! Mean! Why, it's a chance that the Queen of Sheba and Cleopatra and Miss Burdett-Coutts would have given their eyes for!"

So Hannah began to think better of her lord, and the three sallied forth on their festive outing with merry words and rippling laughter. In the tram they attracted considerable attention. Lord Mane squeaked and chuckled and swore; Mrs. Mersey

laughed and chatted from the moment of entering the car to the end of the journey, and Hannah smiled so sweetly into the earl's eyes, and spoke so musically, that all the young blades in the tram, try as they would, could not take their eyes from her face.

Lord Mane walked the ladies over Westminster Bridge, led them up Whitehall, and then, after nearly being run over in Trafalgar Square, found his way into the Strand. At the largest restaurant he paused.

"Too much gilt, eh? Bad cookin' an' high prices. What d'ye think?"

Mrs. Mersey announced that it looked a very respectable place, and Hannah said she thought the cooking would be as good there as anywhere else. So, with no little misgiving on the earl's part, they entered.

The long, brightly lighted rooms were well filled. In the first men and women were dining in evening dress at pretty round tables with shaded candles. Beyond this room, and up a few steps, was a plainer company, sitting in workaday clothes over simpler fare. Lord Mane made his way in that direction. Hannah looked back over her shoulder at the women in evening dress as she climbed the two or three stairs to the hall beyond. She envied them their fine clothes, their grand dinners, the attention they received from the attendants.

In the long hall, amid the clatter of plates, the noisy rushing hither and thither of panting waiters, the little earl, with his hat tilted over his eyes, slowly

led his two ladies, walking up and down till he found a spare table. Then the three seated themselves. Next to them a German in a gray suit was reading a paper and smoking a strong cigar. In front of them three young clerks, with their hats on, were puffing at bulldog pipes and laughing noisily. The earl and his party drew many eyes.

"Pretty daughter they've got," said one.

"Pretty because she isn't like either of them," laughed another.

"He's the funniest little devil I ever saw; but isn't the girl fond of him?"

"Rich, I expect, and she's wheedling him. Trust a daughter for getting money where the mother fails!"

In the meantime our party was preparing to enjoy itself. With his hat by his side, his arms resting on the table, the earl beamed with great satisfaction at Mrs. Mersey, and blinked so continuously that the good lady imagined he must suffer from paralysis.

"Now this is very nice, isn't it?" he said. "Makes me feel how pleasant it is to save money so that you can come out and spend it on a tip-top entertainment like this. 'Pon me honor, ma'am, I don't exaggerate when I say I haven't been so happy since I got that *decree nisi*!"

A waiter, eying the little man with sovereign contempt, and then looking doubtfully at Hannah, presented a menu. The earl took it, glanced at it, and pitched it down.

"Three chops," he said.

"Any bodadoes?" said the waiter.

"Humph!" said his lordship, picking up the list; "potatoes, potatoes, where are they, now? Oh, potatoes, threepence; three threes are nine. Yes, I suppose, potatoes for three."

"Any cabbage?" demanded the waiter.

"No, no cabbage; but just bring me a napkin."

"Serviette?"

"No!" cried his lordship angrily, "not a serviette, but a napkin. Damme, why can't you give an honest thing an English name? Get me a napkin!"

The waiter swallowed his anger, and shot off towards the kitchen. The earl chuckled.

"Now, my dear ladies, let us prepare to enjoy ourselves. I am in a religious mood, and there are one or two things in my mind I feel disposed to deliver myself of. I'm like a man who's been locked up for years, and only just come into the fresh air and the sunshine. You, ma'am, are the sunshine; Hannah's the fresh air. Hannah smells nice. I don't know what it is, but she always puts me in mind of a turnip field—you know that smell, a rich, earthy, appetizin' kind of smell. As I was sayin', I'm religious. I want to enjoy the world and the society of true friends. I like you, ma'am, because you're a good woman an', so far as I can see, honest. I like Hannah because I'm goin' to get married to the pretty dark bird! An' now for the ideas in my mind. First of all, ma'am, have you an engagement for to-morrow?"

"An engagement!" laughed Mrs. Mersey. "My dear lord, I don't go into society at all. I'm as free of my time as the Archbishop of Canterbury. The only call I have on it is my district."

"Distric'! what's that?"

"I'm a visitor; go and see poor people, cheer 'em up, give 'em advice, and sometimes coal tickets and bread tickets and soup tickets."

This announcement appeared to give the earl extraordinary pleasure.

"You're a visitor, are you?" he said, chuckling. "A kind of Good Samaritan in petticoats! There's no mistake about you bein' a religious woman; you're a real out-and-out Christian, an' no damn nonsense about lookin' glum and squintin' up your eyes to heaven. Ah! you're the kind of woman I like. I can talk to you about my soul just as if I was discussin' a chop or a hay crop or anything real and everyday, can't I, now?"

Mrs. Mersey was overcome with delight. The honor of discussing a nobleman's soul as if it were a chop!

"Well, now, listen. I feel as if I've neglected Kyn, same as the late lamented neglected me. I'm gettin' fond of that boy; if I don't take care, I shall end in lovin' him. You see, ma'am, I'm a new man. I'm a boy again. I'm full of enthusiasm and benevolence and youthful tolerance!" He chuckled, and rubbed his hands together. "So to-morrow I propose to pop down to Clapham, and take you all off,

Kyn and all, to the Zoo! What d'ye think of that, now?"

Mrs. Mersey declared that it was very handsome of his lordship, and Hannah expressed girlish delight at the prospect, putting the earl a hundred questions as to the animals she should see there. In the midst of this torrent of questions the waiter appeared with the wine list.

"What's this?" demanded Lord Mane.

"De vine leest," said the waiter.

"Oh, it's a wine list, is it? I wonder you don't call the damn thing *Carte du Vins*. It's greasy enough."

"Do you vish to order?" asked the waiter.

"Large brandy and soda for me. Water for the ladies." Then he turned to Mrs. Mersey. "That's one thing I like about religious women, they don't drink wine. And now about my second proposal. Keep cool while I put it. How would you like, ma'am, to come an' live with your daughter, the countess, down at Kyn Castle?"

He rubbed his long fingers across his chin and leered triumphantly.

"Like it!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey. "Why it's like stepping suddenly into heaven. My dear lord, my very dear lord——"

"Hush, ma'am!" whispered the earl. "I don't like bein' lorded in public."

"Well, then, my dear man, you've made a proposal that I accept with my heart in my mouth. It's what I should like more than anything else in the

world, and I promise you that directly you get tired of your old mother-in-law she'll pack up her boxes and go back to her lodgings without a word of reproach!"

The earl chuckled, well pleased. Hannah's joy, perhaps, was the greatest of the three. With her mother in the castle she would feel less fearful of Mrs. Whittle; she would always have some one by her on whose devotion she could place implicit reliance. So she smiled gratitude into the earl's face, stretched over the table and laid a hand upon her mother's arm, and said endless pretty things about the jolly life awaiting them all in the glorious land of Kyn.

This put Lord Mane into the best of good tempers, and he ordered himself another large brandy and soda. After that was drunk, his heart expanding under the influence of the genial spirit and the beaming faces of Mrs. and Miss Mersey, the jolly little gentleman proposed that they should all go to a theater.

"Do you mind a music-hall, ma'am?" he said to Mrs. Mersey, pushing the waiter three coppers from among his change and then proceeding to fill his pipe. Mrs. Mersey declared that with such a champion as his lordship she would go to a French theater or the Chamber of Horrors. Hannah was quite certain it would be delightful to go to a music-hall, and suggested that they should start at once. Puffing at his pipe, his hat over his eyes, his big umbrella under his arm, Lord Mane led the way,

through the crowded restaurant, out into the roaring streets.

"We'll walk," he said. "Walkin' 's good for the digestion. And it'll give me time to smoke my pipe." He conducted his party through many narrow dark streets and presently brought them into the glare and racket of Leicester Square.

They entered the red-carpeted corridor of a glittering theater, and while Lord Mane joined the queue at the box-office, Hannah at her mother's side watched the people arrive. Perhaps, amid so many grand-looking people, all so splendidly dressed, all so radiantly happy, she felt just a little ashamed of the earl, whose appearance was causing a good deal of amusement to two gigantic attendants arrayed in imposing uniforms. She began again her old reflections, wondering whether, after all, she was not murdering her own happiness by gratifying her vanity. So many of the good-looking, well-dressed young fellows with coats over their arms looked admiringly at her as they entered the theater laughing and chatting. She felt it might possibly be nicer to have one of these fresh-complexioned, clean-limbed youths for a husband, however poor he might be, than to go through life side by side with an ugly old man for whom the love of a young girl was impossible.

As she turned these thoughts over in her mind a pair of horses pulled up outside the music-hall, and one of the mighty attendants sprang to the door of the brougham before even the groom could reach

it. Two gentlemen got out. The first, who stopped and gave his orders to the groom, was young and good-looking, and as he came nearer Hannah felt sure that she had seen him somewhere before. The other—— She shuddered as she caught sight of that face. It was Oliver Bolt.

Fortunately for Hannah the earl at this very moment called the ladies to his side. "Five bob each!" he exclaimed; "and we shall have to stand all the damned time!" He was much upset at having to pay so much money, and became rather less talkative. They walked forward into the lounge, and finding a place to lean against, turned their faces to the stage. The earl cheered up a little when the band thundered rackety music, when the gay-looking curtain went slowly up, and when three young ladies in costumes that made Mrs. Mersey exclaim, "Well, to be sure!" tripped coquettishly, as if the boards struck cold to their little feet, before the footlights. The audience began to clap their hands, opera-glasses went up, and gentlemen in the lounge criticized the three young ladies in a very amiable manner. The music throbbed through the theater, the young ladies began to sing and ogle, and everybody settled down to enjoy himself and get his money's worth.

"Not much religion there, eh?" squeaked the earl, leaning across Hannah, and winking at Mrs. Mersey.

"Not much modesty, certainly," sniffed Mrs. Mersey. "To think of any daughter of mine standing

before a lot of staring men and women, with not so much as a kilt on! It's worse than the savages."

"What does the little dark bird think, eh?" chuckled his lordship.

"I think they dance very nicely," said Hannah, "but I can't help feeling sorry for them." She was thinking of the immortal "Requiescat."

"Oh, you think they dance prettily, do you? Well, I'll tell you somethin'. I've seen the late Countess of Mane dance like that!"

"In tights!" exclaimed Hannah, horrified.

"No, not in tights, but in a skirt that kicked over her ladyship's head, which was worse. What d'ye think of that now?"

Ere Hannah could reply, she caught Oliver Bolt and the gentleman who had driven with him to the theater staring at her over the earl's head.

"By George, it's she!" exclaimed Oliver in a voice loud enough for the earl to hear.

"The little nightingale!" cried his friend, laughing as an amateur actor laughs when he is supposed to be very dashing.

Then they pushed rudely past the earl and forced themselves beside Hannah. "My dear young lady!" said Bolt, hardly raising his hat, "how very jolly it is to meet you again! You remember, of course, Lord Escott." He said this with a laugh that suggested Hannah had many secret reasons for remembering Escott, and turning round to present his friend, caught the eye of Lord Mane glaring at him fiercely.

"Hullo, my lord!" said Bolt in great surprise, his large mouth breaking into a smile that disclosed his strong white teeth. "Why, I thought the little nightingale—our pretty little governess," he whispered, "was all by herself!"

Lord Escott was talking to Hannah. "Does a lady usually come to music-halls alone?" demanded the earl, his eyes blinking and his mouth twitching.

Oliver bent his smiling lips to the earl's ear. "Some ladies!" he said, and playfully tapped his lordship's arm.

"Well, she ain't one of them," squeaked the earl, "and, damme, I don't like bein' pawed!"

"Oh, she isn't one of them!" exclaimed Oliver, raising his eyebrows.

"No, damn me if she is!"

Oliver laughed, a quiet, tolerant, man-of-the-world laugh. "Oh, I see!" he said. Then, after a pause, he added: "There is one thing we can agree about, at any rate, my lord—she's as clever as they make 'em, and deucedly fetching. Now, isn't she?"

With which Parthian arrow Oliver Bolt was pleased to discontinue his campaign. "Come along, Escott," he said, and bowing with a very meaning glance at Hannah, and linking his arm in Escott's, he moved away in his grand, dignified fashion.

The earl pressed himself close to Hannah. "What do you know of those blackguards?" he squeaked under his breath.

"I met Mr. Bolt at the castle, and spoke to him once," said Hannah quietly. "I saw Lord Escott

there, but never exchanged a word with him. So I don't know very much about either of them."

The earl was blinking fiercely into her eyes. "What did he mean by——" he began, and then stopped. "I'm goin' home," he said. "Come along!"

"Going home!" cried Mrs. Mersey. "Why, the conjurer's just come on!"

"Conjurer be damned!" cried his lordship. "I'm goin' home, and don't you bandy words with me."

As they walked out Mrs. Mersey touched him on the arm. "Something's upset you," she said firmly. "Oh, yes, don't you deny it, I know as well as if you'd flung yourself into my old arms and cried on my breast for sympathy and comfort. Now, I'll tell you what to do. Go straight home, take a glass of strong whisky and water, and pop right into bed."

"I wish you wouldn't chatter so!" growled the earl. "I know what's the matter with me, an' I know what to take for it, an' I don't want any damned women messin' about me."

"Ah! something has hurt you very badly," said Mrs. Mersey confidently, in her same even comfortable voice, as they stood under a lamp-post. "A man with a heart like yours doesn't talk like that unless he's been hit very hard—very hard indeed. No, I won't interfere. Great griefs like that are best borne in silence. But you'll come to me for comfort yet, mark my words. Good-night, you dear, kind thing!" she exclaimed; "we'll find our way home, and you go straight home to bed."

Without a word or a bow of any kind they parted—the earl shuffling back to his great town house, a lonely, pathetic little figure: Mrs. Mersey tucking Hannah's arm through her own and stepping out manfully, with lifted skirt, to the twopenny tram-car.

XV

CRISIS

WE will follow my Lord Mane—at a respectful distance—to his house in St. James's Square. As Mrs. Mersey had guessed, the old gentleman was badly hit, very badly hit. The motherly heart of the matron could feel that; but for the life of her she was unable to hit upon the cause of his sudden explosion. "Perhaps," she said to Hannah, "he was thinking of his late lamented, as he calls that shameful countess of his." "Perhaps," said Hannah, "Mr. Bolt told him something that upset him!" And Hannah in her own mind began to wonder what deep game that loud-voiced smiling villain was playing so cleverly and boldly. All she knew was that he was playing to ruin her. It was disquieting knowledge, and Hannah slept very badly that night.

But we have allowed Lord Mane to get on ahead of us. Parting from Hannah and her mother, he shuffled along, his hands behind his back, his umbrella under his arm, muttering to himself as he went, so that people turned and stared after him. He crossed the Haymarket, shuffled on past Regent Street, on into the thronging noisy crowds of Piccadilly. People pushed and jostled the insignificant

little man as he threaded his way through their midst, but he took no notice. On he went, with eyes bent on the ground, his thin watery lips twitching ceaselessly as he muttered to himself. 'Buses crawled slowly by, the conductors calling for fares; cabs swung past; vans rattled noisily down the street. He turned off at the passage beside St. James's Church, and went shuffling down that narrow, dark alley in the same slow preoccupied manner, his hands behind his back, his head bent, his eyes on the pavement. In this way he reached his house, the house that Lady Mane had loved to fill with "smart" London, and, letting himself in with his latchkey, shuffled through the hall to the room at the back which he had made his own during the divorce proceedings. He rang the bell. Then, putting down his hat and umbrella, he walked to the table in the window-recess and looked at the letters lying there; three letters, half a dozen circulars, and a packet. The door opened, and our old acquaintance, William Budge, made his appearance.

"Did you ring, my lord?"

"Whisky."

"Yes, my lord," said William, taking his master's hat and umbrella.

"See the decanter's full."

"Yes, my lord." And with a quiet wink all to himself, William departed. When he returned Lord Mane was sitting before his big writing-table, beating the blotting-pad with a pen. William put the whisky at his side. "Anything else, my lord?" Lord

Mane did not answer. William raised polite eyebrows, waited deferential minutes for his lordship to think out a reply, and then, getting none, quietly withdrew.

Lord Mane sat at the table beating the blotting-pad long after the door had shut. His eyes were puckered, his lips were thrust forward; every now and then he would draw in his breath sharply as if in pain; then, the next minute, his eyebrows, those few long red hairs, would go high up in his forehead, and he would grin maniacally. So he sat, holding the pen in his long sunburnt fingers, and rapping it monotonously on the blotting-pad.

His trouble was that he could not think. He had tried as he walked through the streets, with the 'buses and cabs roaring by; he had tried hard to think this matter out there. But it had been useless. He could only realize that he hated Oliver Bolt more than he had hated the countess when she was in the zenith of her power and ruled him with a rod of iron. He hated Oliver Bolt, not for casting aspersions on Hannah's character, but because that smiling scoundrel had snatched away his happiness. He hardly considered Hannah at all. His mind was in such a ferment that only hatred could grow articulate there; all he knew was that he hated Oliver Bolt; all he felt was that his happiness had been filched from him.

So he sat over the great table, rapping the blotting-pad; calmly waiting for the tempest in his mind to die down, in order that he might think

clearly and make his plans. The little carriage-clock on the broad mantelpiece ticked briskly, and as it ticked Lord Mane's rapping on the blotting-pad sounded like some old grandfather-clock beating sullen remonstrance. There was no other sound in the lofty chamber, with its dull bookshelves, its heavy furniture, its somber green curtains. Only the metallic *tick-tack*, and the measured *thutt—thutt*.

The gas burned dimly in green globes, and cast a sickly light on the pinched, twitching face of the shrunken old man sitting at the wide table. It made his long red-yellow hair shine like new straw. It gave his shiny red face a cadaverous hue, and made the sandy hair on his long, bony, red hands glisten like gold. Now and then, the burners being corroded with age, the gas would flicker, and flash a light shadow across the earl's face.

Tick-tack, tick-tack; thutt—thutt—thutt.

At last there was a jerk in the clock's ticking, a dull *whi-r-r-r-r*, and then the vibrating hammer beat out the hour. The earl flung down his pen, and put his hand on the whisky decanter. The silence in the great room seemed rolled suddenly away. The chair on which he sat creaked, the decanter rang on the glass as he poured out the spirit, the gas at that moment flared up with a sharp, hissing sound, and the earl himself rose and walked to and fro in the room. All the oppressive silence and torpor vanished, and with that the tempest in the old man's mind died down.

He drank his whisky with a steady hand, took his pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket, and, walking slowly up and down before the mantelpiece, loaded the old blackened briar. Then, putting the pipe in his mouth, he folded up a scrap of paper, reached tiptoe to the gas, lighted the spill, and then slowly lighted his pipe.

He felt better. He poured himself out more whisky. He began to see the matter clearly. Here, said he, is a girl who promises me peace and home-happiness; she has never been used to the world of vanity fair; she has had to work for her living, and she will value the tranquillity and repose of Kyn Castle. She is gentle, caressing, tender. She loves my son, the child I have neglected, and he loves her. If she were a hypocrite he would have detected it; he would not cling to her. With this girl I may live the rest of my days in peace, on my own land, among the peasants who understand me, rearing fine cattle, growing great crops. My home will be my own. With her—and her mother—I shall not fear Mrs. Whittle. I shall be able to go where I will, do what I like, save my money, and perhaps leave sons and daughters behind me to carry on the name.

He drank his whisky, pressed down the tobacco in his pipe, and went on with his meditations. This girl, he said, meets a scoundrel, a born scoundrel, and she gives him the impression that she is pleased by his attentions. It may be her very innocence: it may be his own conceit. Perhaps he pays her com-

pliments, and she smiles, pleased, like a child—as she has smiled up at me fifty times. Then he goes among his vile kind, and says she is this, and she is that, and her reputation is gone.

Am I to fling away my happiness on the suggestion of a beast like that? Never! I will go to her to-morrow; I will take them out with me, spend my money freely, spend hundreds of pounds, and let them enjoy themselves like children. There shall be no more meanness. We will go here and there, as happy as any people under God's skies; and I will marry her, and when we are married we will all go to the castle together, and there shall be innocent laughter in the corridors, pure women there, and little Kyn running about like a happy boy wherever he chooses.

He took his pipe from his mouth, and chuckled. Fah! he said, to think that I was going to fling away all that on the suggestion of a foul-minded black-guard, who probably doesn't believe that a pure woman exists! The man, too, who ought to have been in Dulverton's shoes, if Criddle heard correctly. Fah!

He laughed aloud, rubbed his hands, and went back to the wide table by the great green curtains in the window-recess. He picked up his letters, opened them, threw all but one away (one from Mrs. Whittle) and then took up the packet. He looked at the postmark; it was London. The writing was strange. He unfastened the string, removed the brown paper, and found there a white cardboard box

with silver edges. He opened the lid. A sheet of white paper was lying there on which was written—"Wedding Cake for the dashing Lord Mane!" With an oath the old gentleman snatched at the paper; it came away, and disclosed there in the box, not wedding cake, but a little packet of letters.

Wondering what jest was being played upon him, and growling in his throat, Lord Mane took the letters from the box, and opened them. The first words to catch his eye were "Poyntz Hall"—in the address at the head of the paper; the next—"My dearest Hannah."

Then he read the letter through, with clenched teeth and knotted brows—right through to the signature "Yours for ever, Dick." He laid the letter down, and took another. Slowly, his pipe smoking sullenly on the blotting-pad where he had laid it, he read that letter through; then the next, and the next, and the next, and the next. Six letters; six passionate love-letters, written with all the flowing enthusiasm of youth, addressed to the girl who had promised to be his wife. He re-read one letter again. The mysterious person who had sent him the packet had underlined one of its sentences. It ran:—"I can almost love the absence from you that inspires letters of such deep and exquisite passion; they make me realize more than any of your spoken words that you love me as I love you—heart, mind, body, and soul, for ever and ever."

The earl turned back to the front sheet and looked at the date. It was the last of the letters; it had

arrived but two days before Hannah left the castle to go—back to her lover's arms!

He laid the letter with the others, and then bowed his face to the table, covering his eyes with his hands.

While the earl went through his hour of agony, Oliver Bolt and Lord Escott played baccarat at Carpatti's, and lost their money. Then they came away from that disreputable establishment, and, with their coats flung over their arms, walked slowly through the now almost deserted streets.

"Come to my rooms for a whisky," said Oliver.

"It's late," said young Escott; "I think I'll go and turn in."

Oliver's arm slid through his. "One whisky, my dear fellow, and mutual consolation in a cigarette. Come along." Then they turned down Duke Street and entered Oliver's chambers.

"There is the whisky," said Bolt, when the electric light had been switched on, "and here is the soda. No, not that chair, my dear fellow; this is yours—the seat of honor—the seat where I sit during the painful process of incubation, hatching out pretty *rondeau* and *villanelle* for the delectation of duchesses!"

He laughed his deep mocking laugh, and pushed the young marquess into his armchair.

"I wish, by gad, I was a clever devil like you!" said Escott, lighting a cigarette. "It's devilish dull doing nothing but knock about town, and devilish

expensive too. If I could write poems, Olley, I'd write 'em all day, in a cottage, somewhere near the sea, and I'd eat bread and cheese and drink beer, and never give a tinker's curse for this vice-eaten Babylon."

Bolt, who was glancing over his letters, looked up and smiled. "Meredith calls it 'a prodded ox'! But what a good fellow you are!" he exclaimed quietly. The tone in which this compliment was paid, the smile on Oliver's face, made the young marquess, as they were intended to do, feel very proud. "But, dear Escott, fancy writing poems on bread and cheese, in a cottage too, and, worst of all, by the sea. It requires a Shakespeare to triumph over impediments of such titanic toughness. No, the poet must drink inspiration from the Helicon of Moet; he must wax fat and well liking on meats worthy of Lucullus."

He drew up a chair, and, with one of the letters in his hand, came and sat close to his guest.

"And why want to be a clever devil like me?" he laughed. "You have the prophet Browning's authority for believing that the man who reads *Lear*, richly bound, seated in a deep chair like that you now honor with the weight of your body, with the best brew of Scotland at his elbow, the finest tobacco of Egypt between his fingers, gets more, infinitely more enjoyment out of Cordelia, good dog Kent, and the explosive old Lear himself than ever Shakespeare got in the making of them. Poets, dear peer of England, write of lords and great ladies: you are

yourself a lord. You are blest a thousand, nay, a million more times than Isaiah, Omar Khayyam, Homer, Heine, De Musset, I. The only poet comparable with you is Tennyson, one who by his poetry earned a peerage. But what a newness, what a French polish in 'The First Lord Tennyson'! What age, what grandeur, what tradition, what witchery of the ages in 'The Twelfth Marquess Escott'!"

He laughed, and lifted his glass. "To the twelfth Marquess Escott! May he never soil his fingers with poet's pen or artist's pencil!" He drank, and laughed happily again. "Think, too, how blest you are in sovereigns, and half-sovereigns, and the sturdy *roue de voiture*! While I, impecunious poet, whose verses do not even pay for the parchment that binds them, am troubled with letters like this!"

He held up the letter in his hand, and fluttered it in the air. "Seriously, my dear fellow, I am in what is called a hole. It is a most uncomfortable hole. For a man of my size abominably uncomfortable."

Lord Escott shifted in his deep chair. "I'm awfully sorry, Olley, devilish sorry," he said, glancing at the clock.

"You couldn't be glad!" laughed Bolt. "It is always so unpleasant when one's friends mention money bothers. One instantly says, 'Confound the fellow, he's going to borrow money.' I hope I didn't make you think that?"

Lord Escott grew very red. "No, Olley, on my word, you didn't. And, besides, if I could ever get

you out of a hole, I'd do it. Like a shot." He struggled out of his chair.

"I wonder," said Bolt, very slowly, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder; "I wonder if—should it come to that—you would mind backing my bill?"

Escott looked anywhere except into Oliver's eyes. "I don't care about backing bills," he said very nervously. "My poor old father always made me swear that I would never back a bill."

Oliver's hand dropped from his shoulder. "That makes me almost disposed to dislike your papa," he said, with a quiet, hurt little laugh.

Escott glanced up. "But, look here, Olley, I'll see if I can lend you the—— What's the sum?"

"No, no, my dear good Escott, certainly not. I will go hat in hand to Mr. Isaacs, duck my head under his condescending proboscis, and beg for my thousand."

"A thousand, is it?" said Escott.

"Don't laugh at the sum!" cried Bolt; "it's a devil of a lot to me."

"And to me!" said Escott. He chucked his coat over his shoulder, swung his hat over his eyes, and went to the door. "I'll see what I can do, Olley. Good-night."

Then Oliver Bolt looked over all the invitations on his mantelpiece—he had been much sought after since his distinguished appearance in the *cause célèbre*—and addressed them with fatherly tenderness: "I am not going to desert you yet. The little poets have their day, they have their day and

cease to be; but that does not apply to me, who more sagacious am than they! Ha! Ha!" He laughed the deep scornful laugh that seemed so full of authority, and then turned to the letter he had flung back to the table. "So you can't bleed him any more, the old reprobate!" he said. "And you think I cannot hope to draw more supplies from that source? Oh, yes, I shall! He shall be my banker to the day of his death; yes, and that damned governess shall eat dust and ashes to the end of her days. That's my answer to your letter, Mrs. Wittle. And as to mending my ways! Pooh!" He laughed contemptuously; and with pursed lips, as if the cheap paper offended his fingers, tore the letter to bits.

XVI

IN WHICH MRS. MERSEY PAYS A MORNING CALL

IF there was anything in the world Mrs. Mersey prided herself upon it was her great mental activity. She never brooded. She never sat weakly over a fire dreaming in the red embers. If she had a great trouble she would descend to the kitchen and tell the landlady that she would cook that day's dinner. But this was only when she had a very big trouble. The ordinary worries of life she met with the needle, singing songs of her girlhood as that gleaming weapon of woman's defense flashed in and out of garments destined for the poor of her district. It was her constant remark that all the suicides, all the atheism, and all the dismal poetry of the world were due to the wicked and unheavenly habit of brooding. "People," she used to say, "sit on their troubles and think they're going to hatch out blessings. They might as well put a Bible in their pockets and think they are safe for heaven!" That was her brisk way of putting things.

On the morning following Lord Mane's sudden explosion she appeared at the breakfast table in her bonnet and jacket. She poured out the tea with a more than usually steady hand, and chopped the top off her egg with a finish that a cavalryman at heads-

and-posts might well have envied. Then dipping a finger of bread and butter into the steaming yolk, she asked in a brisk, business-like tone where Lord Mane lived in town.

"In St. James's Square," said Hannah, looking up; "but why do you ask?"

"I'm going to inquire after his health."

"My dear mother——!"

"Allow me to know what is best. If you're not anxious, I am. If you don't feel for him, I do. What is the number in St. James's Square?"

"I really don't know," said Hannah, "but I would very much rather you did not go. It looks as if we were——"

"Is your egg nice, dear?" said Mrs. Mersey, leaning over to Kyn.

"Yes, thank you; but they're a little nicer, I think, at the castle."

"It's the kind of hen you keep," Mrs. Mersey replied. "These London hens, my dear, are cross-breeds—very common—and no more capable of laying a fresh egg than this teapot."

Mrs. Mersey swallowed half a cup of tea, and rose from the table buttoning her jacket. "Do you know, dear, where your papa lives in St. James's Square?" she asked.

"It's called Kyn House," the child replied.

"Of course it is," said Mrs. Mersey.

"Mother, I wish——" began Hannah. But Mrs. Mersey turned to Kyn. "Any message for your

dear papa?" she inquired sweetly, and in another minute she was gone.

Hannah was annoyed. "My mother," she said to herself, "is like all the world, an actor. She pretends to like the earl; she pretends to be anxious about his health; she persuades herself that she likes him, and that his health is a matter of concern to her. That is why people like her. She acts better than I do—better than all the rest of the world. She never takes off her mask. But now she is playing a part in a scene that concerns me, and she will probably ruin the plot."

Hannah was angry, and Hannah's anger was of a silent, invisible kind; it acted like a churn to all the liquid bitterness of her soul—stirring it up, beating it here and there, till presently a dead solid weight of resentment occupied all her soul-space, leaving no room for anything else. In moments of this kind she did what her mother never did—she brooded. Depressed by that solid weight of bitterness, she could only sit and stare before her, with pursed lips and such a heavy, forbidding look in her saint-like face as would have taken Mrs. Brough's breath quite away. But as it is no pleasant occupation to watch our dissembler in circumstances of this kind, we will leave her in the Clapham apartments, and hurry after Mrs. Mersey, who by this time has reached St. James's Square.

The good lady walked twice round that respectable quarter, and seeing no mention of Kyn House on any of the sober portals, she made straight for

the veteran commissionaire pacing up and down before the Army and Navy Club. From him she received the information she required and trotted off, devoutly praying that Lord Mane would not have stirred abroad.

While her hand was yet on the heavy bell-handle the great green door opened suddenly, and there stood his lordship dressed to go out, with William Budge deferentially holding the door aside. Mrs. Mersey was struck by the ashen grayness of Lord Mane's face, but she was by no means disconcerted when the little lord demanded testily what it was she wanted.

"Five minutes' conversation, my lord," said Mrs. Mersey; "and I see you want it, for, whether you took my advice or not, you're looking worse than you did last night."

The earl hesitated for a moment, then turned on his heel and bade her follow. William closed the door, and Mrs. Mersey went down the hall with her umbrella crossed over her breast, her eyes resolutely fixed on Lord Mane's very tall hat with the narrow brim. He opened the library door, shuffled over to the hearthrug, and then turned round rather wearily to face Mrs. Mersey. Hannah's mother shut the door and walked to the hearthrug.

"Now, tell me what it is?" she said gently. Such good nature, such innocent affection, such honest sympathy beamed in the old lady's face that the earl was obliged to look down at his boots.

"Come," she went on, "there's something on your

mind, something worrying you. Hannah's young, and thought I oughtn't to come; but I couldn't sleep last night thinking of the look on your face when I said good-by under the gas-lamp. And that look's in your face this morning, only worse—much worse. Yes, and I thought about you all last night; thought of your late trouble, your loneliness, your craving for sympathy. I said to myself over and over again, 'There's that good little man in that great big house of his without one single woman to whom he can open his heart and ask for sympathy.' It kept me awake all night. Now, come, tell me what it is, and see if I can't help you. I'm a plain, motherly creature, but I'm what is called a managing woman; and if there's anything that would give me downright pleasure it would be getting you out of this slough of despond. Come, how can I help you?"

The earl had raised his eyes as she spoke, and watched her eagerly and closely. He was going out, when she arrived, to make arrangements for a long journey abroad. Broken-hearted and friendless, he had no desire to stay in London; and, fearful of Mrs. Whittle, he dared not return to the only place he loved in the world, Kyn Castle, with its cattle and rich meadows. Now this woman had come upon the scene, and he wavered. He loved Kyn Castle, and with a new wife, and especially with this kind, brisk, motherly soul, he knew that he would have the courage to withstand the de-

mands of Mrs. Whittle. Every week since he left the castle he had received letters from that stern woman, letters that renewed his fear of her, and kept him waiting in a city he loathed with all his soul. To return there unmarried would, he knew very well, result in Mrs. Whittle's obtaining complete domination over his will. So he listened to Mrs. Mersey, with hunger in his mind.

"Come," she said, "how can I help you?"

"I don't want help," he said doggedly. "I'm thinkin' of the future. And when a man's been fooled and broken once, the future's a subjec' he'd better consider well, or else go an' hang himself."

"Spoken like a wise man," cried Mrs. Mersey. "You've been fooled and broken by a heartless woman——"

"By a liar," he squeaked angrily.

"Yes, by a liar, and a lying woman is the wickedest of creatures, for the Creator gave the female more power than He gave to man for being downright in speech. A lying woman of fashion fooled you; a woman who was always for having parties, wearing out your carpets and emptying your larders, and was never happy unless she was gadding about. Now, is Hannah that sort?"

"Is she a liar?" he asked.

"My lord!"

"I say, is she a liar? Is she truthful, is she simple, is she innocent? Or is she a double-faced, lying, sin-plotting Jezebel? Now, you're her mother; is she?"

Mrs. Mersey remained quite calm. "You've been up all night," she said; "and you've been thinking first of your last wife and then of your next, until you've got them so mixed you cannot think straight. My daughter a liar! My daughter double-faced! Why, my lord, do you know that all her earnings, save a little for dress, have been given to keep me from starving? The pittance I get from a charity isn't enough to keep me in curl-papers, and but for my Hannah—my double-faced, sin-plotting Jezebel!—I should long ago have been in the workhouse, picking oakum and all that."

"She's kep' you, has she?"

"Ever since she went out to earn her daily bread as an honest woman," Mrs. Mersey replied stoutly.

"She's never been a flirt, I suppose; never given to makin' eyes at every pair of trousers that came into the room?"

"Now, my dear good lord," said Mrs. Mersey, with a smile overspreading her broad, rosy face, "does she look that sort? Does she strike you as a light-hearted strip of a girl with nothing but poetry and ribbons in her mind? Be honest with yourself; does she now?"

"She don't look it, but damme, is she?" He thrust his hand forward, and stamped with his stick upon the hearthrug.

"No, she isn't," said Mrs. Mersey, tossing up her head, "and I defy man, woman, or infant to prove that she is. God bless my soul, why the girl's one of the serious kind; it's written all over her face,

comes out in all her actions. If she's a flirt, with no other thought in her mind but wickedness and foolishness, I'm an acrobat and you're a water-cart!"

The earl was impressed. "She may have had love affairs without ever lettin' you hear of 'em. Many good girls do that, eh?"

"As for that," said Mrs. Mersey, sitting down in one of the armchairs with her fat umbrella over her knees, "I was in love with a butcher-boy when I was three, and head-over-heels in love with the Prince Consort when I was learning French and freehand drawing."

"But serious love affairs, damn it!" said the earl, resenting Mrs. Mersey's light-hearted reference to her past.

"Oh, she may have fancied herself in love with someone, may have written letters and may have given her photograph, and all that tomfoolery; I'm not saying the girl hasn't. But what I do say is that she was never flippant about it—never doing it for the mere sake of attracting attention. She's not that kind."

The earl took a step to the writing-table, paused, then went on again. He put his hand to the drawer where lay Hannah's letters to Dick Brough; then he drew it back. Laying his stick upon the table, and taking off his hat, he turned round and faced Mrs. Mersey.

"Come, now, you're an honest woman," he squeaked; "tell me, do you think your daughter loves *me*?"

"If she doesn't," Mrs. Mersey replied with inimitable calm, "I'm a Dutchman."

"Does she?" cried the earl, rapping the table angrily.

Mrs. Mersey got out of her chair and approached him. "What do you mean by 'love'?" she asked. "If you mean, does my daughter go about talking of your good looks and your beautiful love speeches, no; no, she does not love you any more than I love the Pope's toe. But if you mean, does she admire your character, does she talk of your kind heart, does she say what a lovely home might be made of that old castle of yours, then yes. Yes, she loves you, as I loved my husband, and as he loved me—bless his dear, sweet soul."

The earl leaned against the writing-table, his hat in his hand, his sharp, querulous eyes fixed upon the carpet. Thoughts of the castle, the gigantic linhays, the wide stockyard with its whitewashed rails, the great stack-yard with its rows of huge stacks; and thoughts, too, of the fields with the blooded cattle, the black-faced sheep, the crops of swedes, mangolds, oats, wheat, and barley, stirred in his mind, and turned the balance in Hannah's favor. He put on his hat.

"You're going out!" said Mrs. Mersey.

"Ain't you?" he demanded.

"Yes, but I shan't go home happy till I know your mind's at rest. Look here, my lord," she went on quickly, "it would seem to any evil-minded person that I was here with you doing all in my power to

capture you as a husband for my daughter. But it's so open and unashamed that it shows my honesty, and you'll believe me, I know, when I say this. I came to be of service to you, knowing that Hannah will be a true and good wife, faithful to you, faithful to her marriage vows, and a good, saving and contriving housekeeper, for I brought her up myself."

The word housekeeper caused the earl to wince.

"I know this," went on Mrs. Mersey, "and I'm as anxious that she should be all this to you as I am that she should have a good husband and a comfortable home. There, that's what I came to say, and whether you think ill of me or not I can't help it; and, having said it, I'm going home, and when you've thought the matter over come down and have a cup of tea with us, and you'll be all the better for it!"

Excellent woman! Even if, as the analytical Hannah would have us believe, this sympathy and outspokenness are so much acting, is it not well that we all play such pleasing parts, and strive to make the comedy of life a spectacle whereon the angels may look without, at least, disgust? Let Mrs. Mersey play her part, for it is a part that tends to peace and happiness; and let those convinced that they are wicked by nature, and, for the very sake of honesty, must live wickedly, keep, in God's name, as much in the wings as possible.

Such was the effect of Mrs. Mersey's acting on the earl that he began to chuckle. Thoughts of leav-

ing England went from his mind as dew before a whistling south-wester. Thoughts of fearing the influence of Mrs. Whittle tumbled over the heels of the other miserable reflections in their haste to be out of his mind. Such a woman as this one before him was a new experience in his life; she belonged to a class with whom he had never mixed, but of whom he had ever held that to them belong all the virtues of thrift, simplicity, and honesty. To lose her, to lose this good woman who courted him and recognized his dignity, while she strengthened his will and formed his thoughts, was not to be thought of for a moment. So he chuckled, with his hat over his eyes.

"You've forgotten our engagement," he said.

"I declare you're better already!" said the lady delightedly. "There, I knew a few minutes' conversation with an honest woman would set you on your little legs again, and though Hannah thought I was presumptuous and taking too much upon myself, I knew all along that such words as I wanted to say could do at least no harm and might do a sackful of good."

"And why didn't you bring Kyn and Hannah along with you?" said the earl.

"I thought it was best to see you quietly by myself."

"But our engagement, damme! Didn't I promise to treat all the lot of you to the Zoo?"

He went over to the writing-table and wrote out

a telegram. "How will this do?" he asked. "Bring Kyn St. James's Square in hansom immediately."

"You'd better add, my lord, that you are going to take them to the Zoo, or Hannah will be worrying her mind that something dreadful has happened."

"It'll add to the price of the telegram," he chuckled, but did as he was bid with excellent good humor.

Then the bell was rung, and William was despatched with the telegram, and charged with a message to Mr. Smith, of Duke Street, that a good landau, with a couple of smart horses, "his best, damme," said the earl, should be at the doors of Kyn House in an hour's time.

And when William had departed, the earl opened a drawer in his writing-table and drew forth a cash-box. Opening this with a key he helped himself liberally to gold and silver, which he stuffed into his pockets, chuckling hard all the time, every now and then looking up to wink at the beaming Mrs. Mersey.

"And now," he said, when the cash-box was returned to its drawer, "I'll tell you somethin' about myself, somethin' about my past. When I was young, ma'am, I ruined a woman, a common woman; ain't that dreadful, now? And when I saw how serious it was, ma'am, I felt I ought to marry the girl. I felt, for the sake of the woman's child I ought to put up the banns an' make a damned fool of myself. That would have been very handsome of me, wouldn't it, eh?"

"Very foolish of you!" said Mrs. Mersey, with much emphasis. "No, I've no patience with women who do wrong; they've got power to withstand temptation, and if they yield it's their own weakness, and to reward them for their weakness by giving them an honest woman's right is to encourage viciousness and turn religion topsy-turvy."

"Damn it!" cried the earl, "but you're the most sensible woman I ever met. You see things from the upper air; you're a sort of bird, damn me if you ain't. You see the world from the religious standpoint, don't you, now? And that's the way it should be regarded by all professin' Christians." He chuckled and rubbed his long, red hands together, standing over Mrs. Mersey, as that chubby soul, still nursing her fat umbrella, sat in the big armchair before the empty fireplace.

"But to continue my story," he said, growing serious all at once. "I felt I ought to marry the woman, not bein' as religious as I am now; but bein' fairly sharp I determined not to put my head in her noose, for of all the hard, masterful, domineerin', damned devils in petticoats she was in the first flight, in the very first flight. So I traveled. I went away from my home, where the woman had returned to the service of my mother after a sham widowhood in the north."

"She was a servant?" Mrs. Mersey demanded.

He nodded.

"Bah! I've no patience with the hussies. They're a scheming, contriving lot, every one of them."

"She was a damned handsome woman, ma'am," said the earl; "and she was as near as most women can get to being a countess, damn me if she wasn't." He chuckled, and began stuffing his pipe with tobacco.

"I traveled about England," he went on, "and I never dared to go back to my home for fear of that woman. Fear's a damn funny thing. No man can be bolder with a cabman or a footman or a waiter than me, ma'am; I can stan' my groun' with dignity and firmness that none of your damned loud-voiced blackguards know anythin' about. But with that woman I was a coward." He chuckled, and blinked like an owl. "She had got the upper hand of me. I always felt that if she could get me into a room with herself alone she'd make me promise to marry her before ever she let me out! She had a wonderful masterin' mind, ma'am; a sort of magnetic influence, if you understan'. So I gave her a wide berth, an' made up my mind to marry a decent wife, an' so end the matter."

He struck a match and lighted his pipe. "Don't mind smoke, eh?" he asked, winking through the clouds that wreathed about his shiny red face. "To continue, an' it's a damned interestin' story, ain't it, now?—my wife proved too much for me. Instead of lovin' her in a cold dignified fashion, I sat at her pretty feet with my mouth open, my eyes starin', my hands clasped! I worshiped her like a goddess. If she kissed me I felt the clouds were droppin' fatness; if she let me kiss her I felt as if the end of the

world had come an' I was in the very center of heaven! That was damned foolishness, but my wife, ma'am, was the beauty of her season, the queen of every drawing-room in London, an' I knew damned well that I wasn't a pocket edition of Apollo. So I worshiped her, an' the pretty doll got more an' more the whip hand of me, till some time after our marriage she was my slave-driver, an' I hadn't a penny I could call my own. I'd done the handsome thing by her. She was only a parson's daughter, though she'd got breedin', and had been taken up by the best aristocracy roun' Kyn, an' I made her a settlement that would have made the mouth of a king's daughter water from now to doomsday."

He stopped and rang the bell.

"But she used me ill. She wanted more and more money. She never consulted me in anythin'. She got tired of the best society, an' made herself a leader of the new. She filled my house with card-sharpin' blackguards, with actresses about as wicked as the devils in Port Said, an' told me to keep my own rooms if I didn't like her friends."

William appeared. "Biscuits," said my lord, "and a bottle of champagne."

William withdrew, to wink a mighty wink to himself outside the door. "Now that I've shaken the woman off," said the earl, "I wonder how it was she cowed me, how it was I came to sit still under her confounded impertinence." He blew out his chest, chucked up his head, and blew a great stream of tobacco towards the ceiling. "But I was

her slave, ma'am, an' I feared her a deal more than ever I feared the lady's maid." Here he laughed uncomfortably, and rubbed his nose with the bowl of his pipe. "An' as it happens, ma'am, I feared her so much that I told the lady's maid, who turned out a fairly comfortable sort of woman, an' would sometimes come an' drink a glass of whisky with me in my own little room, that if ever I got free of my lady I'd marry her and live a farmer's life with the park gates locked against all the damned world."

When he uttered this last sentence, which he did with an uneasy expression in his blinking eyes, and many a quick sidelong glance at his auditor, the earl puffed hard at his pipe and felt that he might perhaps have led up to this great and central point in his confession with more tact and diplomacy. He was confirmed in this view by Mrs. Mersey's comment.

"Well," said that old lady, rolling her umbrella slowly up and down her lap, "to think that a hard-headed man like you should be such an idiot! I can't help it; I must say it. You're a nobleman, and you sit in the House of Lords, and you're as high above me as the monument is above Billingsgate Market, but say it I must. Weak, weak, weak! Dreadfully weak."

She was interrupted at this point by William, who entered the room bearing a great silver tray loaded with biscuit-box, glasses, and a jug of champagne. When the servant had retired, Mrs. Mersey was about to begin again when the earl interrupted her.

"But after I'd made the promise," he said lamely, "I saw Hannah, an' fell in love with her, an' it was for her sake, not the other woman's, that I bowled the countess out. Lord! the old arrangement might have gone on till I was in the tomb for all the anxiety I felt to marry the other woman!" He laughed, and poured out a glass of champagne. Handing it to Mrs. Mersey, he said: "So to avoid that servant I ran away a second time, an' I'm not goin' back to Kyn till I've got a good wife an' a damned good mother-in-law to bear me company. Ain't that clever, now?"

He laughed as he helped himself to the wine, and set the jug down with a merry clatter on the tray. But Mrs. Mersey was sitting with staring eyes and gaping mouth. The earl caught sight of the face, and all the merriment went from his heart.

"What the devil's the matter now?" he demanded.

"You don't mean to tell me," said Mrs. Mersey, "that the other woman is still in your household?"

The earl bit his lip. Then he grinned, and after a moment's uncomfortable silence winked knowingly at his mother-in-law. "I ain't quite such a fool as that!" he said, and drained off his glass. "No, not such a fool as that," he repeated, drawing the sleeve of his coat across his mouth. "Help yourself to biscuits, an' don't spare 'em," he said; "for I don't intend to be economical any more till I'm married. We're on the spree, all of us, Hannah, Kyn, you, an' me. We'll spill money, ma'am, like water, and if

you want a fifty-poun' note to pay off bills, ask me for it, an' don't be afraid."

"But, my lord," said Mrs. Mersey, over her untasted champagne, "what is the reason that keeps you from going to Kyn if this horrible, wicked, good-for-nothing woman is not there?"

The earl stamped the floor with his foot, and shot an angry look at his interlocutor. "Why in the devil's name do you keep on proddin' and proddin' an old wound? Damme, I want to forget all about it. The woman lives near the castle, an' she'd throw herself in my way if I went there. Ain't that enough? Now, for God's sake let the matter be."

With that he walked over to the tray and poured himself out another glass of champagne.

The reader will guess why his lordship told his shocking tarradiddle to his mother-in-law. But he may, perhaps, wonder why he did not rid himself of this incubus of a housekeeper, nay, why he had not done so long ago. It is the old story of a strong mind and a weak mind. My lord could bully a cabman, as Hannah had once seen, as well as the most blustering skinflint under heaven. He could brag and swagger and shake his fist with the best of them, but when he stood no longer on the elevation of his dignity, but was brought face to face with those who cared no more for his title or wealth than they did for his hard words, my lord was an altogether different creature. His little explosions of temper served him no purpose here, and the weakness and indecision of his character left him an easy prey to

any stronger and more resolute mind opposed to him. Mrs. Whittle, too, had not made her tyranny too severely felt. She had enriched herself out of the countess's lavish entertainments, and only now and then had asked the earl, or should we say demanded from him? a cheque for private expenses. But the divorce of the countess offered this unscrupulous woman the prospect she had always dreamed of. She knew the earl's temperament, knew that he was a farmer at heart, knew that he would gladly share his home with a hard-headed woman of business who would live his own life, and whose whole character denoted antipathy to the riotous tastes of his doll-wife. So the earl feared to go down to Kyn unmarried, and he feared, as nine men out of ten fear, a scene with those whom they had wronged. Better, thought the earl, to raise her wages, keep her in the same post, and, with the company of my wife and mother-in-law as an excuse, shun her society.

Is there anything extravagant here? Ask the merchant whether he does not dislike sending the meanest of his clerks about his business; the mistress whether it is not with her heart going pit-a-pat that she tells the cook that she is "thinking of making a change." Yes, all of us dislike scenes; all of us hate doing unpleasant things. Some of us pay the cabman a shilling more than his fare, in order to avoid the moment's abuse of a creature we shall never see again. Some of us sit silent in omnibuses when a conductor is rude to a lady passen-

ger rather than take part in a scene. It is man's nature, I think—this fear of the unpleasant. And when the person we ought to get rid of, ought to deal sternly with, is one we have wronged, and a woman, then the very bravest of us is a coward, and prefers to live on the edge of a precipice rather than take the one bold step that will rid him of the danger.

XVII

FIXING THE DAY

ONE of Lord Escott's clubs did not number Mr. Bolt among its members, and it was to this establishment that the young marquess bent his steps on the same morning which found Mrs. Mersey calling upon the earl. Going to the morning-room, Lord Escott wrote out a check for a thousand pounds, scribbled a note to Oliver saying that the money might be paid back at his convenience, and then rose to drop the letter in the box. As he did so he came face to face at the door with Sir Michael Dulverton. The boy colored, then with his frank, winning smile extended his hand. Dulverton, surprised by the kindness of the greeting, smiled also and shook Escott's hand. Then they sat down. It was their first meeting since the affair at Kyn Castle.

They talked of everyday affairs till the conversation turned upon Sir Michael's movements. He mentioned Slee-Marly, his estate near Kyn. "I should like to see that neighborhood again," said Escott, thinking of Miss Haddon. "When you have a bed to spare will you think of me?"

He made this speech very prettily, and Sir Michael, thinking that the boy desired to express

sympathy with him, was touched. "There is always a bed to spare," he said, smiling; "but I fear you would find us rather dull. My mother and I are quiet, old-fashioned people; our entertainments never exceed a garden party; there is no roulette, *no trente et quarante!*"

Escott colored. "To tell you the truth, Sir Michael, I'm rather sick of that sort of thing," he said, in the tone of a modern well-bred penitent.

"I'm very glad to hear it," Dulverton answered; "you were made for much better things. Men like Mr. Bolt play the devil with one's ideas of right and wrong."

Escott twiddled the letter between his fingers and looked down. "He's rather a bore, is old Olley," he said. "One gets a little tired of his philosophy and his poetry."

Dulverton laughed. "I once tasted the poetry," he said, "but my palate is innocent of his philosophy. What is it?"

Escott crossed his legs and looked into Dulverton's eyes. "I suppose," he said, "that to a clever fellow like you it will seem awful rot, but there was a time when it appealed to me—appealed to my worse me. It's the philosophy of Epicurus, I think, flavored with modern sauces. He has no right and no wrong, so far as I can gather, and his only precept is, 'Enjoy the present.' A sort of Omar, without the melancholy. It's founded on the impossibility of ever knowing anything about the soul or the Creator, and all that sort of thing."

"Does the modern sauce quite kill the musty flavor?" laughed Dulverton. "This philosophic pie, my dear Escott, is a very stale one, isn't it? I don't think even Mr. Bolt has ever got his knife quite through the crust. Take my advice and eat from other dishes. Everyone has his moments of doubt, everyone has sometimes despaired. But there are two things that endure: We are only really happy when we are living our best lives; we are only really miserable when we are living our worst. That is not only the real philosophy of Epicurus, it has the additional advantage of being the religion of Christ. Let your wise philosophers tear those axioms to tatters how they will, the truths will remain behind." He got up with a light laugh and gave Escott his hand.

The boy looked into Dulverton's eyes while he held his hand. "I should like more than I can tell you to come and spend a few days at Slee-Marly," he said simply.

"Come, then, my dear fellow. I shall be really delighted. We can play tennis when the sun shines, and when it rains we can borrow the woodman's axe and hack our way clean through the crust of Bolt's pie to the inverted egg-cup below!" He paused suddenly "By the way," he added, speaking very quietly, "you may perhaps think my animus is inspired by Mr. Bolt's appearance in the——"

"No, no!" cried the generous youth. "I know thundering well that to a man like you Bolt must always have seemed a prig and a bounder."

Dulverton was touched by Escott's gentle expression of faith in his innocence. He looked at the youth, and wondered whether it would be wise to ask him the question he was longing to put to somebody who might possess the information he required. In the fresh face of the young marquess, from which all the weary boredom had now quite vanished, he read honesty and simplicity; he felt, too, that the boy was really growing sick of Bolt and the vulgarity of the society in which he had unfortunately mixed himself, that he sincerely desired to cultivate better people. So he put his question.

"Have you heard, Escott," he said, "whether there is any truth in the story about Lord Mane?"

"You mean the new marriage? I can only tell you that when I was with Bolt last night"—he laughed at the mention of that name—"we happened to turn in for half an hour at a music-hall, and going in we saw Lord Mane, the governess, and an old lady at the pay-box. Bolt caught me by the arm, and made me wait till they had walked through to the lounge; he was devilishly excited about it for some reason or other."

Escott could not help noticing that Dulverton was devilishly excited too.

"Yes, and what happened?" asked the baronet.

"Well, Olley righted himself, and suggested that we should play a trick on the old boy. So we went in, and hovered about them, till Olley asked me to go with him and talk to the girl as if we had had

some fun with her at Kyn, ignoring old Mane altogether. It was rather a doubtful thing to do, but somehow or other I consented."

"Did you?" said Dulverton, with the least suggestion of contempt in his voice. Escott colored, and twiddled his letter still more violently in his fingers.

"We had eaten dinner together, and Bolt had made me rather desperate. I felt sick of everything, and in a sort of devil-may-care frame of mind. I was a damned fool, in fact," he added, with a frank laugh.

"Well?"

"Up we went, then, and greeted the girl rather merrily. She seemed utterly surprised, and after a moment Bolt turned round and said something to old Mane. They seemed to be having a row, while I talked to Miss What-you-may-call-it, and soon afterwards we left them. That was all."

"Did Bolt say anything to you as you went away?"

"He said something about putting a spoke in the wheel of the governess' cart, and added that it was a beastly shame old Mane should marry again. I think that was all. He seemed thundering well pleased with himself."

Dulverton had listened with the greatest attention to the recital of this story. His lips were firmly shut, his eyes wore their fixed, concentrated expression, and he leaned slightly forward as if to catch every word. At the end he moved away. "I

suppose, then," he said, "the engagement is a reality."

"Everyone seems to think so. The governess must be rather pleased with herself."

"Yes."

"She's rather a nice girl, quiet and modest and all that sort of thing."

"Yes."

"You remember her singing that night? An awful pretty song about roses; it still runs in my head."

"Yes, I remember." Sir Michael was looking out of the windows.

After a pause Escott moved to the door. "Then I may really come and see you, Sir Michael?"

The question seemed to rouse Dulverton. "Yes, do. Come on Saturday, and stay as long as you like."

Saturday! The day before Sunday! The day when he would go to the little village church and see Beatrice Haddon! Escott expressed gratitude for the invitation with an enthusiasm that surprised Dulverton. And then when the two men had said good-by, Escott dropped his letter to Oliver Bolt in the box, and went off to dream of Beatrice.

And now it is time to look once more at our clever actress. She has been acting beautifully, superbly. To all Lord Mane's remarks on the animals in the Zoological Gardens she listened with keen intelligence, now smiling, now laughing softly, now bending on his lordship looks of admiration for his

learning, now looks of childlike affection which made the old gentleman as proud as the llama with a babe at its side. Such a happy party never visited the gardens before. Lord Mane liberally tipped the attendant in charge of the bears, and the company was treated to a royal performance by those burly comedians. Kyn forgot all about fairies, lost something of his melancholy, as first one bear rattled with his foot the loose bottom rail for buns, then another, for the same bait, folded his paws in a supplicating posture, while a third moved the company to laughter by knocking peremptorily on the floor with eyes fixed upon Kyn's bag of buns. Then there was the bear who danced with grinning mouth and lifted arms, also the bear who turned head over heels, and the bear who climbed nimbly up a pole and clung to the top, catching buns that Hannah pitched deftly into his open mouth.

Clever, clever Hannah! Inspired first by the carriage and pair that was waiting outside Kyn House when she arrived, then by the earl's warm greeting, the champagne, the rattle of money in those old fawn-colored trousers of his, Hannah acted with amazing abandon. Had you peeped into the library at Kyn House, and seen that beautiful Madonna face turned (reverentially) with innocent pleasure first to Lord Mane, then (dutifully) to her mother, and then (maternally) to little Kyn, while she evinced such childlike pleasure at the prospect of a day in the Zoological Gardens—you, dear reader, would have said, "She is no hypocrite, my

life on it." And Lord Mane, being far less astute than you, gave in his heart more emphatic testimony to the virtue of Hannah. He had never realized before how sweetly ingenuous she was, how exquisitely modulated was her voice, how full of rich life her soft cheek, how altogether lovely the lustrous eyes under their dark lashes. He put from his mind all thought of those passionate love-letters in his writing-table; banished, too, all remembrance of his *rencontre* with Oliver Bolt at the music-hall, and gave himself completely up to the pleasure of his priceless possession. He rattled his money and promised his guests long days of delight. He swore that they would suck London's orange dry ere they retired from the civic banquet. He chuckled, he ogled, he boasted, he rubbed his red hands together, he even kissed Hannah when he carried her the wine.

And Hannah! Never before had she seen her lord in so repulsive a mood; never had his demeanor so chilled her life-blood; never had his "love" clashed so discordantly on the chords of her being. But the prospect of enjoying his title with dignity, of possessing money as well as title, gave new zest to her ambition, and she played her part with shining eyes, smiling lips, and all that sweet maidenly air of simplicity that was, in the earl's eyes at least, her chiefest attraction. "So do we greet those we detest in our heart," she said to herself; "so does the doctor affect tender solicitude for his patient; so does the tradesman end a lying, cheat-

ing letter with a protestation of faith. Yes! from the 'Dear Sir' to the 'Faithfully yours'—it is all a lie, all a struggle to get the better of another, to 'attain one's own end.' And in her heart she laughed unhappily, and turned those large solemn eyes of hers, overflowing with love, full on the blinking, twitching face of the little old man who waited on her.

Mrs. Mersey was delighted with her daughter. "At last," thought she, "Hannah realizes the honor that is hers, and the true worth of this good and noble man." So, as we have said, the party was a happy one, and only the shrunk, white-faced child, glancing from one to the other, appeared to be untouched by the magician's wand.

But at the Zoological Gardens even he shook off melancholy; and here the earl's happiness reached its highest point. Never before in his miserable life had the old man tasted joy so deeply. Those cravings in his heart for sympathy and simple pleasures were at last answered to the full. His niggardliness vanished, his new-found generosity increased, he moved about like one in a dream. Every now and then, as the party paused to examine one of the animals, he would press nearer to Hannah, lay his hand upon her arm, and ask with a chuckle if she were happy. Then would the girl turn eagerly from the cage to look into his eyes. "Never so happy before."

And at last, when Mrs. Mersey was mounted on the back of an elephant with Kyn at her side, the earl spoke openly to Hannah of their marriage.

They were sitting under the trees, a few yards from the noisy, merry crowds of children awaiting the elephant's return. Hannah's eyes were fixed in beautiful interest on the laughing prattlers.

"How happy they are!" she exclaimed gently.

"I can only think of my own happiness," said the earl, leaning close to her side. "Damme, I've never felt so pleased with the world before. We'll get married at once; we'll go on bein' happy like this to the end of our days; we'll get married next week, damn me if we won't."

"Next week!" cried Hannah, lowering her eyes. "Oh, no, not next week; it's too soon. You must give me a little time."

"What, in the devil's name, do you want time for?" demanded Lord M'ane. "Ain't you quite sure that you want to marry me?"

"My dear lord," Hannah answered, "you cannot doubt that. You must know—you must feel—that I long for the peace of Kyn Castle, and the joys of our life together. But there are other things to be thought of."

"Are there, now?" he said, smiling in deep satisfaction. "An' what are they, my pretty blackbird?"

"My mother must make her arrangements about money," she answered, looking wistfully before her. "I have few clothes, and none of them—though I have no desire for the mere show of dress—is consistent with your dignity."

"Damn it!" cried the earl, "look at me! These clothes," he added, looking proudly first at his

sleeves and then at his trousers, "have been my best suit ever since I married. On my oath they have!"

Hannah smiled sweetly. "You can afford to wear what you will," she said, "but I—coming to the castle as your bride—must not appear in the clothes of a governess—a servant. I am too proud of your name for that; I would rather delay our marriage a year than begin our life in that fashion."

The earl tilted his old hat still farther over his eyes, and swung one little leg across the other. Hannah's flattery, her gentle tribute to his dignity, could not but please a man so long used to groan under the despotism of one who despised him.

"If you want peacock's feathers," he said, "you shall have 'em. Yes, damned if you shan't. An' I'll pay for 'em, an' you shall wear 'em in London, for I mean to stay here a week or two an' enjoy myself."

Hannah's heart beat for joy. She could hardly speak.

"Ain't you pleased? Ain't you goin' to say 'Ta,' like a good girl?" the earl demanded, with a chuckle.

"You are very generous," said Hannah, "and it will be very nice to see London under your protection, but—well, I shall be happier at Kyn!" She turned her eyes upon him full of sweet love and tender reverence.

"You're a woman in a thousand," cried the earl. "How many women would prefer the farm-yard to St. James's? But you shall see the world before you look over my pigsties. I'll show it to you. I'll

dress you in peacock's feathers, I'll give you the family diamonds, an' I'll take you about an' make the world smile at your pretty feet. An' then, Han, when we're sick of the damned show, when our lungs are stuffed with fog an' smoke, we'll go back to the country an' laugh over our wood fires at the damned fools wastin' their lives in these confounded streets."

Hannah listened with eager heart. She leaned forward in her chair, with the point of her umbrella carving lines and crosses in the thick gravel-dust; her face was partially hidden from the earl, but he could see the proud, happy smile on her strong, red lips, the heightened color in her dusky cheek. He looked at her admiringly, striking his leg every now and then with his stick. So they remained; the one thinking of her ambition's realization, the other intoxicated with his possession of a simple, unspoiled nature.

In this position Mrs. Mersey found them on her return with Kyn. As she approached, the little boy, holding her hand, looked up in her face and half stopped her in her forward march.

"What's the matter, my dear?" she asked, taking her eyes from Hannah and looking down at the child.

"I want to ask a question," he answered. "May my father have two wives?"

Mrs. Mersey stopped dead. "Your mother, dear child, has gone away; she will never come back again, and so your father is going to give you a new

mother, and there she sits at his side. Aren't you glad, now," she added briskly, "that you are going to have such a nice, kind, loving mother?"

The boy hung his head as they resumed their walk. "I hope my real mother is happy," he said. And then they joined the happy earl and the still happier Hannah.

XVIII

THE CURTAIN RINGS UP

IT is now high time to inquire how fares the black-browed Mrs. Whittle in the dreary splendor of her deserted castle. To her, every day of the earl's absence was a turn of the rack on which her aching body was stretched. His last words to her had been, as the reader will remember, "Go to the devil!" delivered with excellent courage through a stout oak door. Instructions as to the disposition of Kyn and Miss Mersey had reached her by William Budge in the form of a letter after the earl's hurried departure for London. Other letters had passed between my lord and his housekeeper since that day, of which it is now the author's duty to apprise his reader. But, it may be said at once, that every letter had only added to the woman's torture, and had but fanned the embers of hatred and malice in her heart to something very near white heat.

Mrs. Whittle was in this predicament. With the earl before her she could have assumed so threatening a port as to cow the weak will of her lord into granting her request—the fulfilment of his promise. But she knew full well, and by experience, that the most cowardly may possess the valor of a Hector when defiance is hurled at him by letter, and from a

safe distance. She had tried this course, when a long much-underlined letter reached her from Mr. Oliver Bolt asking for Dick Brough's letters to Hannah, informing her at the same time of the rumor that the earl intended to marry the governess. With tigerish anger the woman had written incontinently to the earl reminding him of his promise, refusing to credit the report of his engagement, and announcing her determination to call upon him in London if he did not instantly write and give the rumor the lie. My lord's answer was brief. It ran: "My servant has a letter for you if you call at Kyn House. It contains a cheque for a month's wages and your dismissal." That was all, and with the receipt of this letter fell the housekeeper's dream of possessing control of the earl's coffers.

But she still hoped, albeit with sickening heart and aching brain, that the earl might yet return unmarried to the castle. She awaited the letters every morning, day after day, week after week, month after month, with feverish impatience, longing for some word from his lordship which should bid her hope anew. But the answers that she received to her letters, concerning the management of the castle, contained little more than grumbles as to the expenses she was incurring.

"Don't forget," he wrote on one occasion, "that going to law, even about a wife, costs money. I've none too much to spare, and shan't have, either, for many a year to come. Tell Criddle to get rid of a couple of the gardeners, and you must do with

a maid the less." Then she would write letters about the farm, about the yearlings, the cows in calf, the last litter of pigs, the sheep, the brood mares, the crops, and the poultry. Long wistful letters they were—letters which she fondly hoped would move the earl's bucolic heart to thoughts of his beloved stock, and bring him back to the farm by express train. But Mrs. Whittle, like many another hypocrite, could not sustain her part with a pen, and these letters only made the earl chuckle and squeak to himself that of all the damned silly designing women old Whittle was the stupidest. The answers she received to these pathetic epistles were, however, kind, and even suggested hope that her dream might yet be realized. "When I open your letters," he wrote once, "I smell the cowsheds and pigsties; London smells like a stale egg." And on another occasion: "You should take to painting, Whittle; you've got an eye for color." So the woman nursed the dying hope at her breast, straining it to her heart through the long watches of the night, and feeding it through the dreary friendless days on these mocking scraps thrown to her from the earl in London.

One blustering autumn day, when the trees, like a terrified host flying from an avenging enemy, seemed to be breaking before the wind—flinging up their arms, bowing their faces to the dust; when the grass in the meadows trembled and struggled under the shrieking blast; when leaves were whirled like a flock of birds into the leaden sky, or bowled over

the shaven lawns of the gardens in a wild, ceaseless procession,—a day, in brief, ominous to those with secret thoughts and over-loaded conscience—Mrs. Whittle received the blow that shattered her hopes, and transformed her from the dumb, silent sufferer, to a tigerish spirit thirsting for revenge.

She had risen early and gone about her duties with her old mechanical thoroughness (a thoroughness which kept that huge castle spick and span with three servants), and had retired to her room to watch from the window the arrival of the letters. The wind that roared down the chimney oppressed her with premonitions of trouble; the trees bowing and swaying in the gusty blast warned her of danger. She looked over the park and gardens, agitated as they were into wild commotion by the furious wind that sent tremendous clouds scudding across the heavens, and fixed her eyes on the gray drive, up which at every instant a great pillar of dust was driven with incredible fury. In the dim distance she could see the bend in the drive that led direct to the great iron gates, and it was upon this point that she fixed her cold eyes, with her hands clasped slackly together in front of her. Through the storm of dust and whirling leaves she looked at that point, convinced in her mind that to-day's letter would be different from all the rest, that her fate would be decided by its import. She was turning over these dreadful forebodings in her heart, when a cloud of dust, like the smoke of cannon, rolled suddenly from the drive, and she descried, walking towards

the castle with bent head, the boy who brought the letter-bag from the lodge. A sharp cry escaped her, and she turned away from the window. The wind whistled mockingly down the chimney, a pack of leaves was hurled pattering against the pane. She stood in the center of the room, waiting.

A thousand thoughts tore her mind. She would never marry the earl. She would remain there as servant to her life's end. Her child would fight life's battle penniless. She would see another installed as mistress at the castle. The woman to whom she had shown open and undisguised enmity would return to rule over her. All her dreams had come to naught. Her long patience was mocked when reward was almost within touch of her hands. She had waited, and toiled, and planned all these years—for naught.

She turned, with scowling eyes and clenched lips, to the window. The trees seemed to blow across the landscape as she looked out upon the scene. Everything seemed to be falling and breaking. The sturdy boy, blown along by the gale, was dimly seen in a mist of powdery dust. He was nearer now—much nearer. By the time she reached the servants' hall he would be knocking on the door. But she did not stir. She stood watching his approach, like one in a dream, thinking her own thoughts that concerned not the boy or his letter-bag.

Presently he turned off at the side path leading to the back of the castle, but she still kept her vigil

at the window, her eyes fixed upon the distant bend of the drive at which he had first appeared. So she stood till a knock on her door roused the distracted creature from her reverie. She sat down hurriedly at the table, covered with her books, seized a pen and bade the servant enter.

She continued to pore over her books while the girl set down the bag, and maintained this attitude till the door was closed. Then she dragged her keys from the pocket of her dress, opened the bag, and tumbled its contents pell-mell upon the table. With trembling fingers she sorted the letters, sending them to the right and left of her, till she reached the one for which she sought—the one she had known would arrive that morning. She tore open the envelope, like an eagle rending its prey, and clumsily pulled out the letter. Then, bending over the table, she devoured its contents. Not a cry escaped her as she read, but her face became ashen gray; the tears gathered in her eyes, and her lips that had been so firmly compressed, twitched and shuddered in the violence of her grief. What she had dreaded had come to pass; her presage of evil was fulfilled to its very limits.

This was the letter she read:—

“DEAR WHITTLE,—When this reaches you I shall be a married man again. Miss Mersey, who has been little Lord Kyn’s mother, will be Countess of Mane. Alterations of this kind affect more than the man and woman concerned. They affect the household, and particularly old and trusty servants. So I write to know whether you would like to stay

on under a new mistress, with a rise in salary of twenty pounds a year, or retire on a pension of £250, which should be enough for you, with something to save for the son. Think it over. In the meantime we shall be traveling about, and shall probably not return to Kyn Castle for six months. Letters will be forwarded.

“Yours truly,

“MANE.”

With this letter the starveling hope at Mrs. Whittle's breast died without a cry. She sat over the table, her lips twitching, her eyes heavy with sullen tears. The wind roared down the chimney, the leaves smote against the window. Outside was the anger of a gale spending its rude force in wild insensate fury; inside, within a woman's broken heart, the spirit of revenge was wakening to life.

And while the housekeeper invented schemes for smiting her oppressor, the Earl of Mane was driving down to Clapham in a cab to be married in a quiet suburban church to the governess of Lord Kyn. He was in a good humor, and frequently chuckled to himself as he blinked through the rain-drenched windows on the pedestrians fighting their way along under umbrellas through the strong wind. He would rub his hands together, stroke his chin, sit suddenly bolt upright with an expression of great gravity on his face, then lean forward—almost doubling himself in two—to laugh and mutter to himself.

And Hannah, in a morning dress of great magnificence—a magnificence that appeared through all its simplicity and somber coloring, sat in her

mother's sitting-room, buttoning her gloves and glancing every now and then towards the clock. She looked a very noble lady—oddly out of keeping with the furniture of the room. The serious expression of her face was rather heightened than decreased by her splendid apparel. She appeared taller, stronger, more womanly in these fine clothes. The simplicity in her face, the saint-like look in her eyes, were deepened. One might have passed her in the street yesterday with a momentary interest; to-day one would have turned round to gaze after her.

"My dear," said Mrs. Mersey, arrayed, too, in somewhat finer raiment than was her wont, "my dear, you look for all the world what you'll be in half an hour's time—a real, live countess!"

"I feel the part!" Hannah answered, getting up to look at herself in the glass. "Yesterday I was like an actress rehearsing Lady Macbeth in a straw hat and a blouse. To-day I have donned my royal robes; I have dressed for the part." She laughed under her breath.

"The earl will be proud of you!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey, watching her daughter with brisk interest and open admiration. "Really, Hannah, I had no idea until to-day what a handsome girl you are."

"Pay the same compliment to my beloved husband when he arrives in his wedding garments. Bless his dear little ugly face, I sometimes feel quite fond of him, almost as if I could kiss him! By the way,

my dear mamma, you will have to kiss your son-in-law to-day."

"What!" cried the old lady. "Me kiss an earl! I'd as soon send a valentine to the German Emperor. Bless my heart, a fine liberty that would be. You don't seem to realize what a great man your husband is."

"Oh, but I do!" cried Hannah, with a light laugh. "If I hadn't realized that, over and over again, I shouldn't be wearing this frock to-day. Do you think I have married him for his yellow hair, or his little feet, or the light in his beautiful eyes?"

"Well, of all the brides I ever met!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey. "Really, Hannah, I don't think you quite know what a serious service you are going through this morning. I wish you would remember that marriage is a religious state, and that you are going to kneel at God's altar to——"

"Don't, don't!" cried Hannah impatiently. "I am going to kneel at the altar as the actresses kneel in the cathedral in *Faust*. I am playing a part, and I shall play it with reverence and skill."

"Playing a part!" Mrs. Mersey said. "If so, you are deceiving the earl and blaspheming the Church service."

Hannah looked at her mother with open contempt. "You talk nonsense," she said sharply. "My part is to make the earl happy, to act love for him so well that he will believe to his life's end that I love him, and by that love, and in the faith of that love, to live as peacefully as if I worshiped him body and

soul. Deceive him! I should be guilty if I married him and then turned upon him afterwards. That would be failing to act my part. But I shall take care to sustain my benevolent rôle to the end. You needn't fear a scandal, any more than a judgment from Heaven on my blasphemmy of the Church service!"

She spoke hurriedly, albeit in her low voice the utterance was scornful; the expression of her searching eyes was contemptuous. Mrs. Mersey had never seen her in this mood before; she gazed up at her daughter with open surprise, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping. When the torrent of words ceased abruptly, and Hannah turned away, she jumped to her feet.

"I thought," she said, "you were a good woman, a girl who believed in God and followed in His commandments."

"Which commandment have I broken?" said Hannah, wheeling around.

"All of them."

"The fifth?"

"The fifth?" cried Mrs. Mersey, surprised by the violence of the question.

"Am I not honoring you by marrying the man you wish me to marry with all your heart? Don't let us discuss religion. I am my own mistress, though I obey you in this, as I have obeyed you all my life."

"I don't want you to marry the earl," Mrs. Mersey cried violently, "unless you love him."

"I do love him," Hannah answered.

"How love? when you talk of acting a part!"

"Love is acting, just as politeness is acting, as everything is acting. If I act uprightly I am a good woman."

"Good or evil," said Mrs. Mersey, "you have no more religion than my umbrella; and a woman without religion is like a lamp without oil. Never, never, never in all my life have I been so bitterly disappointed as I am in you this day. Take care, take care; the time will come when you will want religion; when you will knock and it will not be opened, when you will seek and not find!" Saying this Mrs. Mersey marched from the room with her head in the air.

A few minutes afterwards the earl entered, dressed in his old frock coat, his old fawn-colored trousers, the brimless tall hat in his hand.

"Nice weather for a weddin'!" he chuckled. "It's rainin' cats and dogs; hope we ain't goin' to live a cat-and-dog life, eh?"

"I shall begin the cat part at once," said Hannah, all smiles, "by lecturing you for coming in those old clothes."

"What!" cried the earl, spreading his arms wide and looking down over his toilet; "anythin' wrong with this suit, my best suit, the suit I was married in to the late lamented?"

Mrs. Mersey entered the room as these words were said. "It's not the clothes that matter, it's the

heart," murmured the good dame. "I've no fear of your heart, my lord."

The earl glanced at Hannah. "D'ye hear that, Han? It's the heart, not the coat an' trousers, you've got to examine."

"Such a heart as yours," smiled Hannah, "deserves richer covering."

"A white waistcoat would have done it," chuckled the earl, "an' I've got a couple somewhere in Kyn House. Damme, I've a mind to go back an' put one on."

This remark made Mrs. Mersey laugh; Hannah took the earl's face in her two hands and declared he was "a perfect love"; and so, peace being restored, the laughing, happy trio descended to the front door, before which the earl's cab was waiting in the driving rain.

"Have you got the ring?" laughed Hannah, as the cab rolled away.

"A beauty," said the earl; "seven poun' ten, an' weighs a hundredweight."

"May it wear like the one my dear husband put on my hand nearly thirty years ago!" exclaimed Mrs. Mersey piously.

"Don't!" the earl expostulated. "It makes me feel as if I'm goin' to my funeral! Fancy Han a widow! It's enough to break my heart; on my weddin' day, too!"

Hannah leaned forward and patted the earl's hand. "You are not going to leave me, are you?" she said blithely. "We're going to laugh and joke together

for many a long day yet, and I shan't lay flowers on your grave till the snow's in my hair and Time has clawed my face all over!"

She laughed her low, pretty laugh, and gazed into Lord Mane's eyes with merriment and love struggling for mastery in her large dark orbs. The earl swore she was a good sort, and bade Mrs. Mersey cheer up. Before the old lady could reply, the cab stopped with a jerk at the church, and the three hurried under their umbrellas through the rain to the half-opened door.

"Am I to wait?" bawled the cabman, the rain dripping from his hat-brim on to his large blue nose.

"A minute or two," answered the earl over his shoulder; "I'm only goin' to get married."

The cabman shook the rain from his drenched wide-spreading cape. "Look alive about it, guv'nor," he said, stamping on the ground; "soonest said, soonest mended; and my mare takes cold werry quick in the autumn."

But ere he had finished his remark the wedding-party had left the umbrellas in the porch and marched up the aisle, with a toothless pew-opener hobbling on in front. A serious-looking curate, with a fat clerk in attendance, emerged from the vestry, and walked swiftly through the gloom to the altar, his white robe seeming to enhance the cheerlessness and chilliness of the great silent church.

"Not much of a congregation!" whispered the earl to Hannah.

"It's the weather," she answered, with a smile.

"Hadn't you better kneel?" said Mrs. Mersey, looking grimly at her daughter, and speaking in a hoarse tone of voice which she believed suitable for occasions of this kind.

But the curate had now begun the address; the toothless pew-opener, whose upper lip seemed to have slipped quite into her mouth, was giving the earl a copy of the marriage service, and the fat clerk was standing at Mrs. Mersey's side watching Lord Mane with critical eyes. Hannah fixed her gaze on the Table of the Commandments over the altar, and for the first few minutes listened intently to the words of the service.

She made her responses in a low, reverent tone of voice that induced Mrs. Mersey to feel fully persuaded of her daughter's goodness. "She was acting this morning," said the good soul to herself; "she's her true self now." The earl, too, was struck by Hannah's beautiful seriousness, and glanced at her under his twitching red eyebrows with a new interest. It was only in this part of the service the curate appeared to take any deep human interest.

But if the curate, like the reader, could have peeped into Hannah's mind during the service, how different had been his emotions! Of what was the grave-faced girl thinking as she stood at the earl's side before that gloomy altar? She was dreaming. To her, the church was brilliantly illuminated, the dreary yawning pews were filled with the great ones of the earth, her dark dress was a glistening white

robe trailing far behind her among a retinue of beautiful bridesmaids, the prayer-book in her hand was a glorious bouquet of rare flowers, the pale-faced curate, without even a hood to relieve the gloom, was a dignified bishop, and the old man at her side awkwardly forcing a ring upon her finger was—Sir Michael Dulverton.

She was acting in her mind the scene as she would have had it, not as Fate, the arbitrary stage-manager of life's affairs, had ordered it to be. She was thinking how beautiful the words of the service had sounded if the tall, straight Dulverton, with his heroic bearing, his grave eyes, his sweet, gracious voice, stood by her side, pledging his word before God and man to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death. She was thinking how she would have stood by his side—erect, but with bowed, reverent head, proud, but with maidenly modesty; making confidently her oath before God and man to obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep only unto him.

But the dream ended, and she woke with a smile that made the earl chuckle with delight, to walk behind the fat, wheezing clerk to the vault-like vestry.

"I was saying," said the clerk, taking all the company in with a beaming smile, "that it isn't often we has a earl getting married at St. Michael's." The

curate smiled, opened his register, and mumbled incoherent words to himself.

The earl fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and swore that the vestry was devilish damp.

Mrs. Mersey, who frequented a church of different opinions, was examining the vestry like a general inspecting kit in a barrack-room.

Hannah stood at the earl's side watching the curate, as a woman will regard a shopman hunting through a price-list on her behalf.

"I was saying," said the clerk, who always began his conversation in this form, "that if the people had known of it we should have had the church packed from top to toe, shouldn't we, Mrs. Fripp?"

Mrs. Fripp, sucking her upper lip still farther into her mouth, and in that condition smiling as genially as she could, cast a sickly affirmative with her sad eyes in the direction of the earl.

Hannah wondered when the dreary business would come to an end. At last the curate asked her a question, gave her a pen, and she found herself signing her name in the register. She laid down the pen, turned away, and came face to face with the grinning old clerk.

"Your ladyship, I was saying, is unfortunate in the weather."

"I wish," said Mrs. Fripp, glancing up with her weak eyes, and then looking instantly down to the floor, "I wish your ladyship may be happy and comfortable, I'm sure."

It was said in a miserable voice, as one who

sharply realized the uncertainties of marriage; it was as if the poor, broken creature hoped against all her experience that this marriage at least might turn out to be comparatively free from disaster.

The curate bobbed a quick, nervous good-by; the earl gave some money to the clerk and pew-opener; Mrs. Mersey stalked out of the vestry with her umbrella lying on her bosom like a sorely attenuated black baby; and then—then they were in the blustering and driving rain, and Hannah could breathe again.

"Is the knot tied tight enough?" growled the cabman, opening the door. "It's taken a powerful long time fixin' of it up."

"Marriage," said Mrs. Mersey sharply, bustling into the cab, "is a very serious matter."

"Lor' bless me, mum, I know that," said the cabman, pushing her in; "I'm married myself, and I've driven 'undreds, 'undreds of pore things to church. Serious! My word, I should say so! Where to, guv'nor?"

The earl, who rather relished the mournful gloom of the driver, asked him what he thought of a man who married twice.

"What do I think?" said the cabman, frowning. "Why, if he marries beauty, good; if he marries money, better; if he marries heart-disease, best. And if he marries all three he oughter be Prime Minister of Hingland. Where to?"

Lord Mane gave the address of a quiet hotel in

the neighborhood of Victoria Street, and the party drove off.

"Bear in mind," he said to Hannah, tugging up the window, "bear in mind you've promised an' vowed to obey me an' serve me."

"You must remind me of it every day, or I shall forget," said Hannah.

"Forget!" cried the earl, facing round.

"Because I can only remember that I've promised to love you!" she answered, with a beautiful smile.

"You won't forget that, eh?" chuckled the earl, highly delighted. "Damme, we shall get on like a house afire."

"With no one to throw cold water on us," laughed Hannah, patting her mother's hand.

"Oh, I won't put you out," Mrs. Mersey replied briskly; "but, really, I wish you had been married in an evangelical church. I'd sooner be married on a Friday, or a thirteenth, than in one of those Popish places!"

"We'll bear that in mind for next time," chuckled Lord Mane.

They laughed and chatted, happy and in the best of spirits, till the hotel was reached. There they descended, the earl dismissed the cabman with a sovereign, and the party sat down to lunch.

It was in the afternoon, when mother-in-law, as the earl called her, was preparing to take her leave, that Mrs. Mersey managed to obtain a private word with Hannah.

"I want to tell you," she said, "how pleased I was

with your behavior in church. My dear, it was beautiful; just what I could have expected of your bringing up. And now I know that when you spoke to me this morning you were only acting, as you call it."

"I am always acting," said Hannah, stooping as the old lady stood tiptoe to kiss her. "And so are you, you sweet little thing, and you're one of the cleverest actresses on life's stage. You deserve a better part." So Hannah was married, and thus her honeymoon began.

Fling rice at the happy couple, jangle the bells, flutter a thousand handkerchiefs! The supreme day in a woman's life! She has stepped into the charmed circle—that honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency—to live the rest of her days with a man old enough to be her father, a man whose meanness of soul and purity of mind none has felt so keenly as his bride. Are we to end her story with the sound of marriage bells, with a sprig of orange blossom, with a true lover's knot? No. For in Hannah's life this moment is but the ringing up of the curtain, the beginning of life's comedy. All the childhood, all the girlhood, all the early womanhood spent in earning bread—this was but a time of rehearsal. Now she steps upon the stage, before the eyes of the world, a crown on her head, the music in her ears, the triumph ahead. What is it to her that he who plays Romeo at her side is not the man for whom she would be Juliet. He is only a part of the scenery, one of a great company on the

stage. The part is to her. She has her place, her words, her robes. A thousand hopes and fears are hers, a thousand doubts, a thousand dreams; but Ambition is in the wings prompting her, encouraging her, applauding her. Let the audience shout or hiss she will keep her part till the bell rings, the curtain falls, and Death brings the play to an end.

In the time of man's innocency!

XIX

IN WHICH HANNAH GREATLY DISTINGUISHES HER- SELF

WHEN the Countess of Mane arrived to take possession of Kyn House, a week after the wedding, she found **that** the earl had been true to his word. She was to enjoy her title with dignity. Carriages and horses had been brought from the castle, footmen and maidservants were in attendance, the historic jewels—some of which she had seen on her “predecessor”—were now given into her keeping, and though the earl still swore and cursed as he listed, there was a certain state and dignity about their manner of living which surpassed anything she had dreamed of, anything he had even hinted at in his most generous mood.

“I’ll show ’em,” he said, “that I can still present a pretty wife to the world. I would to God I could take you into the club, Han, dressed as you are now, with that damned proud look of yours. I’d like ’em to hear you talkin’ to me. I’d like ’em to see that good looks can go with goodness, and that old Mane, damme, ain’t a woman’s playthin’.”

Hannah realized what had happened. She seized her opportunity. “Let them see us together,” she cried proudly. “The clubs are not the only courts

of justice in society. Let us storm the drawing-rooms—the best drawing-rooms. Can you do that? Do you think you would care to take me there?”

“Care to! Damme, I’d give my eyes to do it. An’ I’m goin’ to try, Han. I’ve started already. I’ve got my sister, old Lady Susan Wilkinson—she married a bishop at fifty an’ killed him before she was a year older—I’ve got her to come an’ see you. She’s one of the best; she wouldn’t allow any of the late lamented’s friends to come near her, damn me if she would! All the Old Guard swear by Susan. She’s got the blood, she’s got the religion, an’ she hasn’t got the money; so she’s all right, she’s one of the Chosen. Nobble her, Han, and you’ll sweep the board.”

So Hannah, having sworn to obey her lord, proceeded to nobble the Lady Susan. She set about this delicate work in her quiet, methodical manner, ascertaining by innocent conversation with Lord Mane that this august sister was interested in the East End of London, that she was High Church, that she was a Whig, that she was an anti-vaccinator, and that she accounted all rich Americans the enemies of Righteousness, Law, Order, and the British Empire.

For many days the young countess, with good books and reports of missions at her elbow, sat in the big, stately drawing-room of Kyn House awaiting the Lady Susan’s arrival. Her mother, on these occasions, was offered the carriage, but Lord Kyn was kept at home to sit with his stepmother

in the great, silent room, where the crackling of the fire, the soft ticking of a little gold clock, and the rustle of leaves turned by the studious Hannah were the only sounds that broke the monotony of their vigil.

At last Lady Susan arrived. A footman flung open the door one bitterly cold afternoon, announced her arrival, and, with a heart beating excitedly in her bosom, though outwardly calm, Hannah rose from the sofa and went forward to greet her sister-in-law. She expected to meet her in the center of the room, but she had reached the door, where the footman stood with awful majesty, before she caught sight of her visitor.

Lady Susan was toiling from the last broad stair towards the drawing-room. She was tall and thin. She wore a heavy bonnet, from whose forbidding front descended a long, dark veil; a white fur cape hung about her shoulders; a black mantle fell in straight lines from the long, thin neck to within an inch of the knee; her skirt was many folded and trailed far behind her; she carried a great muff in one hand, while with the other she lifted a portion of her skirt up to the waist, leaving an emphatic elastic-sided boot with brief patent leather toe-cap and a certain length of white stocking visible to all the world.

"How good of you to come," murmured Hannah, advancing with decent modesty.

The old lady dropped her skirt, extended a hand covered in a black cotton glove, and bowed her

head. Hannah conducted her through the drawing-room door, the footman retired, and the two walked slowly and silently towards the fire. Kyn rose with his book in his hand, and stood irresolute on the hearthrug.

"You are very kind to come and see me, Lady Susan," said Hannah gently, "especially as the weather is so very bad. This is little Kyn. I forget whether you have met him."

Lady Susan had lifted her veil, and disclosed a long, fleshless face, very white, in which gray eyes stared in a dull, uninterested, fish-like fashion from two awful caves carved under the straight, narrow brow.

"I met him at his baptism," she said, drawing a black-bordered handkerchief from her muff, and violently rubbing the sharp, loose point of her long, thin nose. Hannah had never seen a nose shoot so pliantly from left to right. And this no doubt would have impressed her with becoming wonder but for the tones of the old lady's voice.

Such a voice she had never heard before. It was a man's voice, lightened by some weird, feminine crack, or creak—a voice full of poor earthly pride and self-importance, yet ghostly, unreal—a voice from the grave. It struck a chill through Hannah, and set her mind wondering how the old lady managed to produce it and live.

"I met him at his baptism," she said. "He has grown; he is very like my brother." Then she turned and looked at Hannah, still standing before

the fire, her skirt trailing, as it seemed, over half the floor, the top of her bonnet reaching high up towards the ceiling. "And you are my brother's wife. Very young; younger than I had thought."

Hannah tried to look into those fish-like eyes with modesty, humility, gentle dignity, maidenly pride. She might just as well have tried to meet their dull stare with contempt and derision. She quickly lowered her eyes, and waited for the judge to pronounce sentence.

"My brother was unhappy in his former marriage," said the Lady Susan; "his wife was quite an impossible young woman. I hope in the present case it may be different. I shall pray for you both."

There was a long silence. At last Hannah found her voice. "It is my most earnest desire," she said a little huskily, "to make the earl's life, after all his terrible trouble, happy and peaceful." She looked up with an expression of such exquisite humility as would have flooded the heart of Lord Mane with the waters of joy. But before the awful, relentless stare of those dull gray eyes the expression melted swiftly away, and once again she sought cover in the carpet.

"You have taken upon yourself a great and responsible duty," said the Voice. "I trust you will not find it beyond your powers. A young girl might well shrink from it. And the child—he is fond of you?"

"I am very fond of him," Hannah whispered.

"Do you still teach him his lessons?"

"Yes," said Hannah, telling a very big fib. The boy looked at his aunt and wondered why she was standing there instead of sitting down like a rational being.

"What does he learn?"

"At present only the most elementary subjects. He is not very strong."

"Does he know his catechism?"

"Not yet," murmured Hannah.

"He is old enough to learn it—quite old enough. A child is never too young to learn the reasons for his existence, especially a child who has been neglected by his parents. I should begin that lesson immediately."

"I will certainly do so," Hannah murmured.

"Good-by," said the Voice, and the black cotton glove came solemnly forward.

Hannah almost jumped. "Oh! won't you stay a little longer, Lady Susan? May I not give you some tea? Pray rest a——"

But she stopped dead, transfixed by those awful eyes. "Good-by," said the awful Voice.

"Good-by," gasped Hannah. "I am so sorry you cannot stop, so very, very sorry."

The old lady solemnly inclined her tall bonnet a few inches forward, removed her eyes from Hannah, and walked over to the child. She laid two fingers on his head and bade him look up. "You are a good boy, I hope?"

Kyn looked at his stepmother and kicked one of his shoes against the other.

"He is very good," said Hannah; "he is always thinking what he can do for others."

"Poor child! poor child!" sighed Lady Susan. "He has a difficult life before him." And she sailed, with a becoming rustle of garments, towards the door. Hannah rang the bell, hurried forward and opened the door. The old lady looked at her as one may look at a stranger who does one a passing service, and then, with another inclination of the dread bonnet, and drawing her veil over her long, fleshless face as if performing a religious rite, she began her descent of the stairs. Hannah followed as closely as the long skirt, flopping slowly from stair to stair, would permit, but at a bend in the journey the old lady, from behind her veil, begged that she would return to her drawing-room, and, this being given in the tone of a dismissal, Hannah, without another word, returned miserably to the fire, which was crackling derisively in the large comfortable grate.

But she did not long despair. Her old lord appearing soon after explained with many a round oath, many a chuckle, that it was only old Susan's way, that she meant no harm by it, that Hannah would be entertaining royalty before another six months were over her head, and that he himself would accompany her when she went to repay Lady Susan's chilling call. Thus, with encouragement and ambitious prognostications, Hannah turned away from the contemplation of her failure to entertain the Lady Susan, and gave herself up to comforting

dreams of the future. In her lucid intervals she taught Kyn the catechism.

A few days afterwards the earl announced that it was time to return his sister's call, and together they drove away to Warwick Square. Hannah did not feel any great trepidation on this occasion. In the first place her lord's company was a stay and support to her; in the second, she had begun to think that the best society, if the Lady Susan were a shining example of its brilliancy, was no more to be desired than the vulgarity of the set honored by Mrs. Bobby Robinson's patronage.

"Heigho!" sighed Hannah in her mind; "I am in search of something, I know not what, and for all my pains I get no nearer to it. I don't think I want the best society; I'm sure I don't want smart society. What I long for, I think, is an audience—a vast company innumerable as the sands of the seashore—before whom I may exhibit my glory, my state, my pomp, my worldly circumstance! Yes, perhaps it is that of which I am in search; but I cannot say. Everything is a shadow when one grasps at it."

In the midst of these reflections she found herself walking up a solemn flight of stairs, passing a conservatory filled with as many bird-cages as flowers, on up another shorter flight, and then—an open door, a sound of voices, a company of people.

Lady Susan advanced. She was wearing an impressive widow's cap, and came forward with her dread watery gray eyes staring solemnly out of

their caves. Hannah touched her long fingers and stood on one side while the earl made his bow. Then she was conducted to a sofa, and presented to a lady—the Duchess of Mottingham.

The duchess was a handsome woman, with kind brown eyes, a sweet mouth, in whose features refinement was as apparent as bloom on a peach. Her voice, too, was gentle and soothing, her manner sweet and caressing.

"We are making arrangements for a great entertainment in Plaistow," she said. "Are you interested in mission work?"

Hannah turned eager eyes upon the sweet duchess. Yes, such work was very near her heart. Her father, her dear father, had died toiling in the slums. Hitherto she herself had only worked in villages, but gladly, oh, how gladly, would she hail any opportunity of doing good in those dreadful centers of want and destitution.

While she spoke she looked round the room. Her husband was talking to a good-looking middle-aged gentleman, very carefully dressed, with neatly brushed hair, mustache, and whiskers. There was a dean or a bishop in the room, she could not say which, and he seemed to be the great favorite, keeping everybody in good spirits by his wit, his anecdotes, and his riddles. The women were all handsome, all well-dressed, all unmistakably great ladies. But there was no one there so delightful as her duchess, no one who seemed so genuinely kind, no one whose society—nay, whose friendship she so keenly desired.

While she talked about the East End and listened to the plans for the great meeting, the earl approached with the well-groomed gentleman, and, after shaking hands with the duchess, said that he wished to introduce the Duke of Mottingham. The duke bowed, stroked one of his nice fresh brown whiskers, and glanced a little doubtfully at the duchess.

"Lady Mane," said that good lady, "is very enthusiastic about the East End. Her father was a clergyman there for many years, so she feels a great interest in our work."

Hannah felt more grateful to her father at that moment than she had ever felt before. She looked up sadly at the duke. "People who try to fight poverty and sin there must be very brave," she said.

"Your husband," answered the duke, smiling and raising his nicely arched eyebrows, "is, I am sorry to say, a heretic. He has been abusing me most dreadfully for the small part I play in the missions, hurling political economy at my head like eggs at an election meeting. I am literally bespattered with logic, really!"

"What I say," cried the earl, "is this. You coddle these confounded people, you encourage 'em to live by charity, an' you keep 'em in places where they ain't wanted while the villages are dyin' for 'em. Ain't that logic, now?"

"But would you have them neglected altogether?" said the duchess, in a gentle tone of reproach.

"I'd have 'em, ma'am, find out by painful experience the only way to self-respect and success in life. You ain't goin' to do that by teas and prayer-meetin's. I ain't condemnin' your motives, excellent motives, most creditable motives; but I say, ma'am, you're doin' more harm than good."

"Oh, this is most disheartening!" cried the duchess.

"I'll fetch the bishop," laughed the duke. "'Pon me honor, Mane, you're too much for me."

The earl chuckled. "Bishops are wordy fellows; but I'll stick to my point till the tea comes, then he may have it which way he likes!"

"There is a great deal of truth in what Lord Mane says," the duchess remarked soothingly to Hannah.

"Yes," she replied thoughtfully, "one has often thought of the danger incurred even in doing little simple acts of kindness—the little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love."

The duchess looked at her quickly. "Are you a Wordsworthian?" she asked, with a smile.

"Heart and soul," said Hannah, remembering how she had hated those long readings with her poetical father.

"He is a relief after Browning, isn't he?" the duchess cried in a whisper. "One hears nothing but Browning nowadays, till sometimes one is almost tempted to live one's whole life in a study of his poems. But Wordsworth is so beautiful, so simple, so very wise."

The smiling bishop approached. "I am concerned," he began in a deep voice, folding his hands on his ample paunch and settling his double chin comfortably down on his broad chest, "I am concerned, my lord, to hear that you are opposed to us."

"Tooth and nail," chuckled the earl, blinking up at the large, impressive dignitary as Mr. Simon Tappertit may have looked at G. Vardin in his 'prentice days. "I don't think you've a leg to stan' upon. You relieve present wants an' you don't care a ——, a blow, my lord, for the consequences of your acts."

"Open criticism!" ejaculated the beaming bishop; "open, honest, downright knock-me-down criticism. Now, my lord, the position is this. We, feeling that something ought to be done to bring sweetness and light into the lives of these poor creatures, do, in our own fashion, certain things which we honestly and humbly believe may result in bringing a little, a very little, light into this city's dark places. Whether we do right or wrong, the spirit that animates us is a healthy one—a very healthy one—and it will assuredly find an outlet in one channel or another. Now, then, tell us, my lord, tell us in good broad Anglo-Saxon, what we ought to do in this matter." He rolled his ponderous head on one side, smiled so that the corners of his mouth curled up towards his eyes, and gently tapped the tips of his plump fingers together.

"In the first place," said the earl, "no teas, no

coal tickets, no meat tickets, no blankets. Nothin' of that kind."

"Dreadful!" sighed the duchess.

Hannah noticed that all the people gathered round her little lord were smiling as a crowd smiles upon the antics of an organ-grinder's monkey.

"Nothin' of that kind. Nothin' that's soft an' effeminate an' coddlin'. Instead of that——"

"Ah!" said the bishop, rolling his head on to the other shoulder.

"Instead of that—plain speakin'!"

"Plain——?" queried the bishop, while the duke laughed softly.

"Plain speakin'!" said the earl emphatically. "I'd go down to these people an' I'd tell 'em that if they didn't drink away their money in the public-houses, if they didn't back racehorses, if they didn't go to theaters and music-halls, they'd be able to live like honest, self-respectin' men and women."

"My dear lord," cried the bishop, in the hush that fell upon the group of listeners, "why don't you? Why don't you, now, my dear lord? Nothing would give me greater delight, I honestly assure you, than to see your lordship, from a safe retreat, assuring a great host of East-Enders that they ought to be ashamed of themselves."

There was a polite little laugh, and the earl looked annoyed. Hannah came to the rescue. Looking at the bishop with a modest smile, she said: "It is a little hard, is it not, my lord, to make the critic a creator? Lord Mane is criticizing, is he

not? In the country, where he is the worker, not the critic, he acts as he thinks one ought to act in the East End."

The duchess was quite delighted by Hannah's gentle, modest championship of her husband. "And there is a great deal of truth in Lord Mane's contention," she began, when the awful Voice interrupted.

"My brother does not know what he is talking about," said Lady Susan in a tone that settled the matter for all ages. "We are not told to judge and denounce our fellow-creatures. We are told to help, them in their distress. In these missions we do not pauperize and unman our people, we give them the opportunity of learning self-respect and the first principles of religion."

"Admirable!" said the bishop.

"Quite, quite!" exclaimed the duke.

And then the door opened, and a servant announced Miss Haddon.

"Ah!" cried the bishop, "here is someone to tackle Lord Mane, and convert him into giving us a handsome subscription."

Hannah watched the rector's daughter enter, and considered how she would greet her. Everyone appeared to welcome the pretty girl as a great favorite. Lady Susan almost smiled, the duchess left Hannah's side, the bishop stood gazing at her with one cheek almost entirely on his shoulder, while the other guests nodded, or went to her side, with the greatest goodwill in the world.

She had been in Bethnal Green, she said, the whole day. They were getting on famously. The vicar was on fire with enthusiasm; only one curate seemed to think it was unholy for women to interfere in such work. The mothers were coming in, the children were flocking to them, and in a week's time—at any rate before she went back to Vedonshire—the mission would be in working order.

In the midst of her conversation she caught sight of Hannah. She paused for a moment, then came over to her with a gracious smile, and greeted her with gentle words. Then the duchess was there, and the duke, and the bishop, and even Lady Susan. Hannah found herself thronged by kind people, people whose goodness gave her a sense of rest and happiness. Tea was brought to her; she was talking about Wordsworth, then about agricultural laborers, then about flowers, then about foreign politics, then about goodness knows what.

People were brought up and introduced to her. There was Sir Arthur Outwood, Mr. Edward St. Austell, Lord Pewsey. Lady Pewsey was telling Hannah that she meant to come and see her that week; then she had promised to sing for the Duchess of Mottingham in Plaistow on Tuesday, and, yes, she was walking to the piano in the smaller drawing-room leading to the conservatory, and Lord Pewsey was arranging the seat for her. She was to sing. But what?

Before her sat representatives of the very best people in the land—the noblest, the kindest, the

gentlest, the proudest. She looked towards them, and her eyes beheld only Lady Susan staring at her with the dread aspect of a headmaster awaiting a boy's stammering prevarication. What to sing? What to sing? She laid her hands upon the keys, and in that minute there jumped to her mind another of those little songs in the making of which her poor dreaming father had beguiled the dark nights in his deserted parish. She struck the notes, forgot the dull, gloomy gaze of Lady Susan, and, thinking only of the beautiful duchess, sang her dead father's song:—

What may I do that pain shall cease,
 What may I do to still unrest,
 What may I do that God's great peace
 Shall enter and possess my breast?

Peace that will calm all heart-regrets,
 Peace that will bring the Hope now fled—
 Till the last sun in silence sets,
 Till the last whispered word is said.

Ah! I may find that Peace, e'en now!
 In shadowed ways of Sin and Fear—
 Where I may smooth one aching brow,
 And wipe away a single tear.

Hannah was neither a great singer nor a great artist; she had learned no tricks. But her voice was musical, and it was sympathetic. Every word was clear and clean-cut, every phrase was given its natural emphasis. And then, the music—so unlike the ordinary ballad—so strange, so sad, so infinitely simple, could not fail to appeal to those who sym-

pathized with human suffering and spent their days in doing good. There was a low murmur of gratitude when she rose from the piano. Voices began to break the silence, and she was once more sitting beside the duchess.

"Tell me the name of your song," said the duchess; "I have never heard it before."

"It has no name," Hannah replied, conscious that other people were listening. "It was written by my dear father."

Then she told how that same poor curate had spent his hours of rest in composing little verses and setting them to his own music. No, she told them, he never attempted to get them published. They were written for his own comfort, and sometimes she, a little girl, not knowing anything of their pathos, would sing them to him. That was one of his great delights; and now, how pathetic they were to her! How different from all other music in the world!

Somebody else went to the piano and sang. After that people began to say good-by. Lady Pewsey reminded her that she would soon be calling; Mr. St. Austell hoped that she would come and sing for him some night in some part of the East End; and the bishop, bowing his great head over her hand, begged her, with a solemn smile, to convert Lord Mane from the error of his ways. But her great triumph came when she bade Lady Susan good-by.

"You sing nicely," said that old lady. "You must let me hear you again. Good-by."

And as the carriage bowed silently away through the gathering gloom, as she leaned back with her furs round her, her flushed, glad face hidden in the darkness—only visible to her lord in flashes as they passed a lighted shop or a more than usually bright gas-lamp—he chuckled over her triumph, swore that a religious woman was what he had always wanted, and damned himself any number of times if she were not the best gell in the world.

Thus did Hannah make her entrance on the grand stage of life. Never did more charmingly modest creature lend attentive ear to conversations that had no interest for her, or present more sympathetic gaze to people who were boring her to death. And after singing at mothers' meetings, handing bread and butter round interminable tables, chatting amiably to garrulous old women in stuffy clothes, she gradually emerged through the waste places of the East to the comfortable glory and splendor of the West. She became the friend—yes, dear reader, the friend—of many a great lady, she was among the guests at the selectest receptions in Europe; she chatted to cabinet ministers, to ambassadors, to cardinals and bishops, to dukes and duchesses, to great generals, and, at last, with her very soul on fire, she talked to royalty. Her name appeared in the papers among those the hem of whose garments Mrs. Bobby would have given all she was worth to touch. She went to

the opera in state ; she dined at places where all the world might see her glory ; she drove through the streets, attracting the world's gaze. Everything was hers. She might go whithersoever she wished, purchase whatsoever she desired. There was none to say her No, none to dash the cup of happiness from her lips. All that she had ever dreamed of—if we except the trivial, girlish ambition of marrying the man she loved—was hers, now to enjoy to her life's end.

And the earl was her chief abettor in the enjoyment of this heritage. With her he, too, had emerged from obscurity. No longer looked at rather doubtfully, and whispered about, when he entered his club, he found plenty of men to court him, to consult him on the subject he understood better than anyone else in England, even to listen to him when he discussed general politics. And one afternoon he went down to the House of Lords and delivered a speech of half an hour on an agricultural rating bill that won him the praise of the Prime Minister. "The noble earl's interference in this debate," said the great statesman, "has been very happy ; I hope we may have the privilege of listening to his lordship on future occasions." And after that the Prime Minister's daughter left cards on Lady Mane, and at the next dinner-party given by the Premier the Earl and Countess of Mane were among the guests.

There were other reasons, too, for his lordship's great contentment. After a brief delay (caused by

[Mrs. Whittle having consulted a friend in London on the subject) the answer arrived to the letter announcing his marriage—an answer full of deep humility, and desiring to remain in his service for another year or two. “Settled old Whittle,” chuckled the earl, in the privacy of his study, and he locked the letter away with Dick’s love letters to the countess.

Investments happened to turn out well at this time, and interviews with his solicitors more and more impressed his mind with a truth he had always shrunk from believing—that he was a man of great possessions. With this conviction came the realization that he was growing old, very old, that he could not hope to enjoy his treasure for many years longer. “Hang me,” cried the earl to himself, “but I’ll have a splash while I’m in London, an’ Han shall enjoy herself like a lady.”

But in the midst of this glorious success, a cloud sullenly drifted across Hannah’s sun and darkened all her world. A sudden change came over her. She stayed long hours in her own room. She refused invitations that a week before would have given her intensest delight. No longer she accompanied the earl and Kyn in their morning expeditions to the British Museum, the National Gallery, the Natural History Museum, the Crystal Palace, the Aquarium, the Zoological Gardens. She pleaded she was not well, and spent the slow hours sitting in long-drawn loneliness, thinking, thinking, thinking—as only women can think—of a single subject

at one single point. It possessed her mind, it governed all her thoughts. From it she could no more remove her attention than an oak can uproot itself. She was overtaken by Destiny as she moved across life's stage, and for her now the play had no interest. It was of herself, of the horror of her bodily condition—such she considered it—that this dreaming woman thought through the long days, and the long, long nights. She had hoped that it would be impossible: that such a bitter, humiliating fate could never overtake her. But it was not only possible; it was certain, it was assured, it was here.

At first she wrestled with herself in secret, then, after a month of this bitter introspection had worn away all her protecting affectation and left her nerves exposed to every touch of the coarse thumb, she took counsel with her mother, shocking that good body out of her senses by what Mrs. Mersey considered the most unnatural and wicked state of mind that any woman could possibly get into.

"Go down on your knees, Hannah," cried Mrs. Mersey sternly, "and thank God for His great blessing. There's many a woman, ay, many a great and noble woman, who would give all her possessions for what you blasphemously, impiously presume to rail against."

But Hannah was not to be frightened into a good and beautiful frame of mind. She shut herself up, moped and moaned in secret, thought many and many a time of drinking the little bottle of poison,

and finally came to the conclusion that if she did not leave London immediately she would infallibly go out of her senses.

"I want you," she said to the earl one day, "to take me back to the castle."

"Why?" said my lord, spluttering in surprise.

"Because I am ill. London is killing me!"

"Tell us the truth!" he said doggedly. "I don't like secret thoughts. Don't you begin that game, attemptin' to keep thin's to yourself. Understand?"

She looked hardly at him, setting her teeth. "I want it to be born at the castle," she said bitterly.

And as the earl clapped his hands, danced and chuckled, and shouted excitedly, she flew from the room to bury her face in her pillows and curse her hideous fate.

"There!" chuckled the panting Lord Mane to himself, "that's what I call a religious woman. Modest!—she's as shy as an angel. She's a good gell, a damned good gell." And straightway he set about making preparations for the family's return to Kyn Castle, rubbing his hands together in huge delight, and chuckling congratulations to himself on his great good fortune.

XX

HANNAH LEAVES THE STAGE, AND MOPES IN THE WINGS

IN every neighborhood there is always one gracious old lady at whose feet Society cheerfully elects to kneel. When her carriage pulls on to the village cricket-field you will see the parson and half a dozen ladies spring up to greet her, the players turn their heads for a brief minute from the wickets, and the rustics smoking pipes round the refreshment-tent elbow each other and jerk pipe-stems in her direction. She is always the great guest at every garden-party, and the first person to be asked to patronize a bazaar or a flower-show. To her side, on all public occasions, crowd the young and thoughtless as eagerly as the old and sober—all anxious to pay court to their queen, all feeling that to omit such reverence would be an unpardonable affront. And how few the words she says to them! A sweet smile, a gentle bow, and that is all. But to touch her fingers for a moment, to be the recipient for one second of her gracious smile—this is to go on one's way rejoicing, happier and better, possessing some mystic joy that fills the hedgerows of life's highway with scents of flowers and songs of birds, and brings the sunbeams dancing before us on the long gray road.

In the neighborhood of Kyn Castle the queen was Lady Dulverton, the white-haired mother of Sir Michael. God knows if even Hannah could have kept silence had she known what agony this sweet old lady endured in her son's disgrace before the eyes of the world. As sweet a lady as ever loved what is pure and clean, as ever believed in nobility of mind and the love of the Creator, Lady Dulverton had lived in undisturbed peace of mind for many happy years, her only grief Sir Michael's apparent lack of initiative, his aversion from publicity, his love of ease and privacy. For she had hoped to see him ruling England ere she closed her eyes in the last sleep, she had prayed that he might leave to generations of Englishmen a name of strength coupled with righteousness, of firmness linked with love. That had been her training, and the result was what Hannah had detected in his face. Strength was there, shining out of the eyes like a plume on a knight's casque; gentleness was there, like sunbeams rocked on the waves of a mighty sea.

And when he seemed to be overcoming his dislike of publicity, when his name was seldom named in the newspapers save with some reference to the great future awaiting him, the bolt had fallen from the blue; and the child of her heart was driven back from the great world, where great fame is won by great effort, into a privacy that would never be broken. This, then, was Lady Dulverton's cross, and though she still smiled graciously on the world,

and be sure the world crowded to her side now with greater eagerness than ever before, the poor old lady's heart was quite broken, and she longed sincerely and without ceasing to shuffle off the coil of mortality.

One consolation, however, was the sudden introduction into her life of the young Marquess Escott. The boy with his winning ways, for he had quite abandoned the premature boredom of his Oxford career, with his enthusiasm for life, his great courtesy, his illimitable admiration of Sir Michael, brought the breath of hope into the old silent rooms at Slee-Marly, and brightened the gloom that had fallen so crushingly upon the ancient house of Dulverton.

Escott had plenty of time to devote to the old lady, for, much to his heart's bitterness, he discovered on the very day of his arrival that the beautiful Beatrice had withdrawn the light of her countenance from the rectory and was actually organizing a mission in some dreary quarter of the town he had deserted for her sake. But young Lord Escott did not sulk. He grew ever more fond of Dulverton, and whether they were striding over fields quoting now Horace, now Scott, now Hazlitt, —or panting in the old dismantled schoolroom with iron masks over their faces and foils in their hands,—Escott felt that he was somehow or other better for companionship with Dulverton and that in that companionship he was growing gradually more worthy of the incomparable Beatrice.

One afternoon Dulverton and Escott were striding along the muddy lanes on their way back to tea at Slee-Marly, when a humorous passage that Dulverton was quoting from Dickens, much to the mirth and merriment of Escott, was interrupted by the sound of horses thundering along behind them. Dulverton pushed Escott gently to the side of the road, and half turned his head to see what vehicle was approaching. "Hello!" he cried abruptly, and then pushed on again, resuming his quotation.

In another minute two great black horses pounding through the puddles, swung an omnibus past them, an omnibus piled with luggage on the top, and containing four people inside. One of these four, a woman, looked quickly at the pedestrians through the open window of the door, and then turned her gaze hastily away.

"Lord Mane has come back, then!" said Escott as the quotation came to an end.

"Yes," said Dulverton, and Escott wondered if he had offended his host by referring so abruptly to the mere incident of a carriage passing by, in the midst of a delightful conversation about Dickens, because Dulverton hardly spoke for the rest of the way.

But at dinner that night he was still gloomy, and instead of playing billiards after Lady Dulverton had retired for the night, he suggested that they should dive into a case of books which had arrived from London that afternoon. And when Escott, with four or five volumes on his knees, happened,

in turning a leaf, to glance in Dulverton's direction, he noticed that the shadow was still there, that Dulverton sat staring blindly at the book before him, reading nothing, seeing nothing, heeding nothing.

It occurred to Escott at last that the momentary sight of Lord Mane had perhaps revived in Dulverton's breast memories of his downfall, had made him realize once again that his career was ruined. Filled with sympathy for the man overthrown on the threshold of his ambition, Escott quietly slipped the books onto a table at his side, and went quietly from the room. In the hall he lighted a cigarette, and then going to the porch of the front door, stood there looking out on the night.

Dulverton did not say a word when he went, and only the closing of the door seemed to rouse him from his stupor. He looked round, saw he was alone, and then resting his head on his hands, leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and renewed his meditations.

After some minutes he rose from the chair and walked to and fro in the room. "The devil take her!" he said, with a little laugh; "I won't bother my head any more!" He went to the mantelpiece, selected a pipe, examined the bowl with great care to see if it were quite empty, and then leisurely filled it with tobacco. "The devil take her!" he laughed again, looking at the tobacco as he gently loaded the bowl; "what does it matter? Fah! the devil take her!"

And the next minute he had his arm through Escott's, leading the wondering young marquess from the porch to the billiard-room, laughing, chatting, and saying all manner of bright things as they passed on their way.

The brief sight of Dulverton, a sight at once so sudden and unexpected, had produced stronger effects upon Hannah. Her gloom deepened when she saw him. A scowl swept across her brows; sullen anger loomed in her eyes; unlovely defiance sat upon her lips. She alone had seen him, and she did not tell Lord Mane, or her mother, as the omnibus bore them swiftly forward, that Sir Michael Dulverton, the innocent man whom she might have saved, the man whom she loved in her own selfish fashion, had been the first of their acquaintances in Kyn to look into her eyes.

She was still thinking of this meeting, wondering whether she would see Dulverton often, whether he would cut her or reproach her for his ruin in secret—when the omnibus came to a stop, the door was opened, the steps unfolded themselves, and she found herself standing in the great hall—face to face with Mrs. Whittle.

It was something of a shock to Hannah, this sudden appearance of her old enemy. So engrossed had she been with her own moody thoughts that for the last quarter of an hour the very existence of this woman had been blotted out of her mind.

For a brief second they faced each other stonily; then Mrs. Whittle half bowed, and Hannah mur-

mured something—a word of greeting in a tone of contempt. There, slightly bowing, stood the housekeeper in her decent black, unrelieved by ornament or color at any point; and before her, with furs loosened so that the delicate lace about her throat, pinned there with a jewel, and falling down over her bosom, was visible—mockingly, triumphantly visible in all its soft rich beauty—stood the wife of Lord Mane, proud and defiant.

The beautiful young countess, with flushed cheeks and eyes that sparkled in the bright lights, drew off her gloves, and Mrs. Whittle, under her heavy brows, watched the firelight shining on those long brown hands and on the ring of gold. Hannah, looking in her direction, saw the under lip drawn quickly in, and could see the stiffening of her jaws.

At this moment the earl came bustling in with his hat very much over his eyes, his hands groping, so it seemed, for threepenny bits at the bottom of his overcoat pockets. When he came opposite the housekeeper, he jerked out one of his hands, extended it, said "How do, Whittle," and dropping the cold fingers that closed almost tragically round his hand, bustled off to his room, humming, muttering, stamping his feet, and making those puffing sounds in which a man indulges on a freezing cold morning.

Mrs. Mersey, who had the sleeping Kyn in her fat, motherly arms, gave Mrs. Whittle a brisk smile and a friendly little nod, and followed Hannah to

the staircase. No, she would on no account allow anybody to take the child out of her arms. A bother? A burden? Bless his dear little heart, she could carry him a hundred miles!

Mrs. Whittle went with the countess to the room selected for Mrs. Mersey's abode, and then returned with Hannah along the corridor, like a shadow following a man on a moon-white road. They stopped at Hannah's door.

"Do you wish to give me any orders, my lady?" she said, her head slightly inclined, her voice slightly contemptuous.

"Yes," said Hannah, entering her boudoir.

Mrs. Whittle, surprised by the girl's proud defiance, followed her into the brightly lighted room, where a fire was burning merrily, and where Hannah's maid, with bonnet and jacket still on, was busily carrying boxes and bags from the boudoir to the bedroom beyond.

"Wait in the bedroom, Simpson," said the countess.

The girl retired and shut the door.

Then Hannah turned and faced Mrs. Whittle. The scowl was back in her young eyes, hatred and contempt hardened the lines of her mouth.

Mrs. Whittle returned the stare with dull, passionless aversion. No longer was the head bowed, no longer was there any affectation of servility.

"Well," she said suddenly, "what are your orders?"

Hannah came nearer. "I'll have no spying in my house," she said. "That's all. Go."

Mrs. Whittle stood for a moment glaring at her in dumb wonderment.

"Go!" said Hannah, with eyes blazing, her finger pointing to the door. "When I want you, I'll ring for you. Go!"

For one moment hate's red flame leaped up and swept the swarthy cheeks of the black-browed woman. Then she turned meekly away and left the room.

"I'll break her, break her!" cried Hannah to herself, with set teeth and sparkling eyes. "I'll have her cower under my gaze. I'll have her tremble when she comes into my presence. I'll have her crouch when I approach, skulk when she hears my voice, quail and shiver before me like a dog!"

These very unlovely sentiments were the result of two things. In the first place Hannah's condition had made her so loathe life that she now cared not a jot for the consequences of indulging any passing whim or caprice. She hated life, hated herself, and in this frame of mind the desire to exert her authority and inflict pain on those whom she considered her enemies was as strong as an ocean tide which nothing can hold back. In the second place, hating herself and dreading the hour of her delivery as a soldier might dread the moment of his degradation, she had seen unexpectedly the man she loved, the man she would once have sacrificed all her ambition to marry. The one cause reacted on the other, and the consequence was the tigerish boldness with which she greeted the housekeeper,

and those revolting sentiments which, as we have seen, possessed her storm-tossed mind.

Only to the earl did Hannah make any effort to control her passion, and yet it was the earl, the cause of all her degradation, that she hated more than anyone about her. In striving to please him she found a certain grim relief for her suppressed emotions, and though she cursed his name in her heart, she would walk by his side over the meadows, particularly if he was walking near Slee-Marly, and laugh with him and chat with him and make him as happy as he had ever been in his life.

Once in these walks she saw Dulverton and Escott, and then she passed her arm through the earl's, leaned down and laughed happily in his face. She did not bow to Dulverton, but she looked up and saw that he was regarding her with that old, grave, reproachful expression, half kind, half angry, which she had known so well in the days gone by.

"There's old Duly over there!" exclaimed Lord Mane. "What ought we to do? Shall I give him a nod, eh?"

"No," said Hannah.

"He did me a good turn, Han—and you, too!"

"Cut him!" she said; "look straight in his eyes and cut him dead!"

The earl chuckled and obeyed her. "He won't interfere in my domestic arrangements a second time, that's evident!" he laughed.

"No," said Hannah, "he will never do that."

The weeks went by, and the time came when

Hannah no longer walked over the fields or went through the farm. The time came when even the earl left her very much alone, when he told Mrs. Mersey that if her daughter didn't alter after the birth of the child he would have to make other arrangements for her comfort. "Damme, ma'am," he expostulated, "never in her worst moments did my last wife dare to look at me and speak to me as your confounded daughter does!"

Mrs. Mersey was ready with a hundred excuses. The earl must wait till the trouble was over, till the child was born. Many women, some of the sweetest, suffered as Hannah suffered now. Let him be patient. Avoid Hannah as much as possible for the present, and in a few days' time the old happy relations would exist again.

It is impossible to express adequately in words the change that had come over Hannah. She was acting no longer, and the sullen passion of her character, so long suppressed and held down for mere self-advancement, now dominated her whole being. She took a savage pleasure in seeking out Mrs. Whittle and blaming her for the most trifling neglect on the part of some underservant. She would make the housekeeper follow her from room to room as she pointed out with scorn and upbraiding how this chair had been undusted, this corner unswept, this table of ornaments disarranged. At one moment she even threatened to dismiss the housekeeper if things did not improve, longing with animal fury for the woman to resist her will

and appeal to the earl. For Hannah, in her ungovernable fiend-fury, was desperate, and thirsted for opportunities that would bring her will into opposition with others. But, to her surprise, Mrs. Whittle bowed her head and was silent. Whatever Hannah said, this strange woman was ready with abject apology. She yielded to Hannah as a child to his parent's chastisement. And with this meek submission a new joy arose in Hannah's heart; she bullied, she scorned, she threatened, she mocked. The joy of exercising her hatred and vexation on one who yielded to her—one who had been her enemy, one before whom she had once been obliged to bow—gave her the bully's zest for life, and she redoubled her efforts to make the housekeeper's lot as like hell as one mortal can make this earth for another.

"'Tis nature," says Thackeray, "hath fashioned some for ambition and dominion, as it hath formed others for obedience and gentle submission. The leopard follows his nature as the lamb does, and acts after leopard laws: she can neither help her beauty, nor her courage, nor her cruelty, nor a single spot on her shining coat, nor the conquering spirit which impels her, nor the shot which brings her down."

And, reader, all this leopard cruelty, all this fiend-like rebellion against destiny, was caused by the drawing near of that moment—surely one of the most beautiful in life—when a woman loses that self-concentration which is the inevitable fate of man, and becomes two selves—herself, her child.

XXI

IN WHICH TIMOTHY BUDGE HANGS OUT A UNION JACK

BEATRICE HADDON had returned to the rectory, and, so the gods willed it, Escott at this time was paying the Dulvertons another visit. He had seen her in church on Sunday, watched her at the organ, spoken to her after the service; and now, on Monday morning—such a jolly, crisp winter morning—he was swinging merrily down the hard, firm road towards the village of Kyn, in the hope of meeting her, speaking to her, looking at her, holding her hand for one short minute. At the “Cripple’s Ease” he stopped to exchange a word with old Timothy Budge—still in his shirt sleeves, still smoking a churchwarden pipe, still sitting on the bench outside the little whitewashed inn.

“What, Budge!” cried Escott, swinging his stick as he pulled up beside the beech tree, “aren’t you cold like all the rest of the world this fine winter morning?”

Timothy pushed himself laboriously with one hand from off the bench, and, sucking at his pipe, hobbled slowly to Escott.

“There’ll be church bells ringing pretty soon, my lord!” said he, grinning with his eyes while his mouth preserved the solemnest of expressions.

Escott colored, tapped his thick boots with his stick, looked down, and then looked up into Timothy's eyes. "Why, what do you mean, Budge?—I don't understand."

Old Timothy drew down the corner of his mouth, puffed at his pipe, and winked. "I was just thinking at that very moment," he said, "of stepping over to the rectory. I was thinking, my lord, that the parson ought to hear of it." He tenderly slipped the fingers of one hand down into his trouser pocket, jerked his knees mischievously forward, and once again winked his eye.

Escott laughed.

"Oh, it'll be fine times, sure enough!" chuckled Timothy. "There'll be flags and streamers, not a doubt about it; and dinners and speeches and fine goings-on. You'll see, my lord, what we little people down in these benighted parts, so to speak, can do when we've a mind to it. We'll show you what we did back along in the Jubilee. Shouldn't wonder if we didn't give you a bonfire up on Cackle Hill!"

Escott said that Timothy was exceedingly kind, but really——

"And it'll bring the earl out—see if it don't!" said Timothy. "It'll make a man of him. We'll have him speechifying and cursing and chuckling same as he used to do back in the old earl's time. It's fine, fine!" exclaimed Timothy, squaring his shoulders, and resuming his pipe. "I like a bit o' fun in the village. I'd like to see it happen once

a week. Yes, and why not? It's good for trade; it's good for people to be cheered up, and——"

He stopped suddenly, brought the hand in his trouser pocket slowly up to his brow, ducked his knees forward, bowed his head, and to someone beyond Escott, exclaimed: "Good morning, Miss; good morning!"

Escott spun round on his heel, and to his horror saw Beatrice Haddon approaching.

"Good morning, Budge!" she cried cheerfully. Then, with a pretty smile, she gave Escott her hand. "Budge!" she cried, "do you never wear a coat, never even button up your waistcoat? It's winter, Budge, winter; and it's freezing hard."

"Just what I was saying," laughed Escott, swinging his stick very much and looking first into Miss Haddon's eyes, then at the church tower, then at his own boots, then into those dark eyes again, then up into the boughs of the beech tree, then at the little brown curls against her lovely neck, then into the windows of the inn, then at her mouth, then at her eyes—where they rested so long that Beatrice had to return the stare, and then they both laughed, and both turned to look at Timothy, and said how ridiculous it was of him to be standing about in the open air without a coat on such a cold and frosty morning.

But Timothy, all this time, was sidling nearer and nearer to Beatrice with that knowing look of his—the laughing eyes, the serious mouth—the long churchwarden pipe held away from him, one

monitory finger of his empty hand raised tragically to prepare her mind for a great mystery.

"I've just told Lord Escott, Miss," he began in a sort of hoarse whisper, "we shall soon be having flags flying, and streamers, like it was back in the Jubilee!"

Escott cleared his throat, went as red as his wool-len waistcoat, and kept his eyes on the ground. He felt half inclined to run away.

"What on earth do you mean, Budge?" laughed Beatrice, utterly perplexed.

"Oh, but it's so—certain sure," chuckled old Timothy. "There'll be flags, and streamers, and—church bells ringing from morning to night. Won't there, though? Oh, I know all about it! Old Timothy can see how things are going!"

This time Beatrice looked a little nervous. "Is anyone going to be married, then?" she asked.

Timothy exploded in a roar of laughter, holding his sides, spinning slowly, very slowly round, on one heel. Poor Escott was now the color of a turkey-cock. Beatrice, too, was growing red. They looked at each other, and then both looked confusedly in opposite directions. "How on earth," each of them was thinking, "how on earth has old Timothy, of all people in the world, guessed our secret thoughts?"

"I think," said Escott hastily, "we had better leave Budge to his joke; it is evidently a very good one, and excellent company. He won't miss us!"

"Oh, don't go!" cried, literally cried, old Tim-

othy, wiping away the tears from his eyes. "Oh, don't go! Wait a minute, Miss, just one minute till I fetches my breath. Lord love me, but you have made me laugh! A wedding! Somebody going to get married!" He began to laugh again, but suddenly stopped as the sound of carriage wheels drew near. He grew very serious. "Wait, wait!" he said, and shuffled forward in his carpet slippers. A carriage came round the corner. Timothy stopped it with uplifted pipe. He exchanged a word with the doctor inside, and then gave a great bellowing cheer with his pipe high over his head.

"Hooray! Hooray!" he cried. "It's a boy! It's a boy, Miss, a fat boy! Be so good, Miss, as to let papa know it at once. The bells ought to be ringing now. A boy! He said it was a great, fat boy! Dang it, but I must hang my Union Jack out. Always the first, my Jack is. Ho! there, Martha, get out the flag. It's a boy, a whooping, great chap, size of a red Injun!" And he disappeared through the doorway of his inn, leaving poor Lord Escott confronting Beatrice Haddon with a face destitute of all expression save utter, irremediable confusion.

At last Beatrice found her voice. "Old Timothy is very delighted. Of course one ought to have known what he meant."

"Of course," laughed Escott bravely. "Of course. But I hadn't heard anything about——" He stopped and coughed violently, then blew his

nose, then wished himself at the devil. Beatrice said she must return to the rectory. Escott walked by her side.

"We shall soon be skating," said Beatrice.

"If it doesn't thaw," he said sententiously.

"Yes, if it doesn't thaw," she answered.

"Awfully jolly these cold mornings," he said, after a pause, with no end of vigor and manly cheeriness.

"Aren't they? I love the winter almost as much as the summer."

"So do I. But we get such few real winters nowadays."

"We were skating last year!" she said reproachfully.

"So we were, of course. Is it good skating here?"

"Oh, very. We had some delightful games of hockey on the ice just before Christmas."

"Really," said Escott, as if he were saying something of extraordinary intellectual value.

They had walked very fast, and were at the rectory gate. "Will you come in?" she said.

He looked into her eyes for the first time since they had left Timothy. She smiled. He smiled too. Then they laughed.

In another minute they were their actual selves, old Budge was quite forgotten, and Escott was walking cheerfully by her side towards the rectory.

And while the village bells were ringing, as old Timothy had predicted they would, and while a

little solitary Union Jack fluttered lightly over the door of the "Cripple's Ease," Hannah, leaning on an elbow, was looking with hungry eyes towards the hearthrug where a nurse knelt over a great roly-poly bundle of white flannel before a blazing fire.

"You're sure there's nothing wrong with him?" she said.

"Nothing, my lady. He's perfect."

She sighed deliciously. "When may I have him again?"

"Not now, my lady. You really ought to sleep and rest, you really ought."

"Oh, I can't sleep! I want to have him with me. I want to hold him in my arms again. His eyes are quite brown, aren't they?"

"The very color of yours."

"Are they? And he's got a lot of hair, hasn't he—more than is usual, I mean?"

"But that will all come off," said the nurse.

"Come off!" said Hannah. "You don't mean he's going to lose all that beautiful brown hair! Oh, nurse, he isn't going to be a bald baby?"

"It will grow again. Now, really, your ladyship must rest quiet and ask no more questions."

"Let my mother come and see him," Hannah begged.

"She has seen him, my lady, already."

"But here, I mean, here where I can see her looking at him."

"Will you promise me, then, to rest quiet after?"

"Yes, I promise," said Hannah.

The roly-poly bundle was delivered with infinite care into Hannah's arms, and then the nurse went off to find Mrs. Mersey, wondering greatly at the change in the countess. A week ago Hannah had refused to see her, refused to speak a word to her. And when she was called suddenly to the bedroom in the small hours of the morning, the woman she tended was a fierce tigerish animal, glaring at her with furious eyes, muttering words that made her shudder and turn cold. But when the child cried, when she felt the little body laid against her breast, she had opened her eyes, with a smile almost divine, and awoke a woman, a mother.

Mrs. Mersey entered the room on tiptoe.

"He's an angel," she whispered.

"Isn't he!" sighed Hannah. "Have you seen him with his eyes open? And look, mother, at his fingers! Look at the little tiny pink nails!"

Mrs. Mersey stooped and kissed her daughter.

"He's perfect, my dear, and the earl's delighted."

"Our son and heir!" sighed Hannah.

"Son, but not the heir, darling," said Mrs. Mersey.

The smile died from Hannah's face. She fixed her eyes on Mrs. Mersey as though not understanding what had been said. Then her lips tightened.

"You mustn't forget poor little Kyn," said Mrs. Mersey.

Hannah only stared.

"And now I must run away, or nurse will be reporting me to the doctor." She stooped, kissed Hannah, who remained lying back staring dumbly into her eyes, then leaned over to kiss the babe. But at that moment Hannah swiftly gathered the child to her breast, bent over him, so as to protect him from her mother, and the old fierce animal look burned once more in her dark eyes. As Mrs. Mersey turned away, the child broke into a loud cry.

We now return to Escott, who has uttered his farewells to Miss Haddon—the exquisite Beatrice whose solemn dark eyes and wondrous proud mouth reminded so many people of La Cenci—and who now is walking back to Slee-Marly alternately blessing and cursing himself for the events of that day. There he had stood like a village oaf before old Timothy (damn old Timothy!) thinking that the old idiot was talking about his heart's secret; thinking, too, that Beatrice had the same notion—Beatrice, who probably never guessed for a moment that he loved her. Yes, decidedly, damn old Timothy. But he must do something besides cursing Budge. He must really say something, look something, do something, to make Beatrice realize that he worshiped those hard roads on which she walked, that a word from her lips rang through his soul like the choir of Seraphim and Cherubim, that a glance from her eyes illuminated all his being with the radiance of Paradise.

Simple, simple young gentleman! Your very unheroic behavior this morning; your stammering

tongue; your blushing cheek; the moisture of nervousness in your eyes, have told the adorable one, in accents clearer than silver tongue of Romeo, that you love her in the only way an Englishman ever does love—body and soul, but as dumbly as the flower loves the sun!

He met Dulverton in the hall, coming out of the study with a packet of letters in his hand. The baronet looked gloomy and morose.

"Has our army entered Paris, or has Miss Corelli written another novel?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Escott replied.

"Why are the bells making this infernal clatter?" Dulverton returned.

"Oh, those bells!" Escott laughed. "No; they're ringing to the honor and glory of Lord Mane. The countess has presented him with a boy."

Dulverton's brow knitted and he gave a little start. "Are you quite sure?" he said in a low voice.

"The authority is infallible. Timothy Budge and my lady's doctor."

Dulverton went to the letter-bag, dropped all his letters in save one, and then looking at this one doubtfully he returned slowly to his study. Escott went on to the morning-room to find Lady Dulverton.

In the study Sir Michael, after much weighing of the letter in his hand, much thought, much walking to and fro, broke open the envelope, drew out the letter, read it through several times, then tore it in two. After that he sat down before his table

and looked out through the window over the green fields on which the white frost still lingered. For many long minutes he sat there, as though unconvinced of his wisdom in tearing up the letter that now lay broken-backed in the paper-basket, then, finally, he took up a pen and wrote another letter. He had sealed down the envelope and was writing the address when Lady Dulverton and Escott entered the room.

"Lunch, Michael," said the old lady, laying her wrinkled hand on his shoulder. "Ah!" she exclaimed, seeing the name on the envelope, "that letter has cost you much to write, dear!"

He looked up in her face. "No, dearest, not a wince. I've accepted after all."

"Accepted!" she cried. "Have you, have you really accepted, Michael?"

"Yes," he answered, rising. "And I feel you are right. All the world that counts believes I am innocent. They want me back; I will go back. I will fight all the harder for the overthrow. It is folly to sit here moping."

There was a light of courage and triumph in Sir Michael's face, but it was as Cimmerian darkness to the white light of pure joy that shone in the face of his mother.

As they walked to the dining-room Michael told Escott that his party wanted him back, that Lord Pewsey had written begging him to stand for the Farndon Division, and that he was going to re-enter public life.

XXII

BREAKING THE ICE

S NOW over all the earth, hard, white, sparkling snow, with a bright blue, cloudless sky—belied like some titanic sail—stretching over the glistening, tumbled scene. The robins sang lustily on the trees, the chaffinches darted and dived after one another in the white branches, and everywhere fell the sunbeams in powdered gold, informing the cold, dead-white snow with a warmth and a color hardly less than the vitality of life. It sparkled on Cackle Hill, this warm snow, over the charred ashes of the bonfire kindled in honor of Hannah's son; it sparkled on the broad meadows, among the trees in the valley, afar off on the sails of a snow-capped windmill; still farther off, on the rumpled downs, that seemed whiter and smoother than any other part of the scene for their daring proximity to the soft, melting blue of the sky.

But nowhere was the snow quite so warm and quite so sparkling as on the lawns at Slee-Marly, which sloped broadly and gently to the wide lake, over whose gentle waters Jack Frost had thrown his leaden shield. For here in a bath-chair, at whose back stood a beaming, red-faced old coachman, sat my lady Dulverton, bending graciously

forward, with her dim, benignant eyes following in gentle tolerance the swift, swallow-like flight of the skaters. And among the skaters there were two whose movements she followed with kindling interest, Beatrice Haddon and Charlie Escott. But any spectator would inevitably have selected these two to watch on that jolly, cheerful morning. For Beatrice looked exceedingly bewitching with her cheeks aglow, her dark eyes overflowing with merriment; and young Escott, with his fresh, boyish face, his clean-cut figure, his laughing eyes, his ringing voice, seemed the ideal knight for so vigorous and beautiful a lady.

The ring of the skates, the sound of the moving voices, the swift gliding of the figures over that leaden shield flung from snowfield to snowfield; the occasional tumble of old Sir Thomas March, the loud sympathy of Major Parr; the flying coat-tails of the rector; the efforts of Miss Eversley-Hackett (amiable spinster!) to drag the eye-glasses dangling over her shoulder back into their proper place; the loud, boisterous chaff of the three March boys; the dignified boredom of young Mr. Clarence; the tall, powerful figure of Sir Michael sailing past everybody else; the pretty faces of all the pretty girls; the dashing gallantry of all the gallant men; and the close—oh! so very close!—companionship of young Escott and the beautiful Beatrice,—these made up the general picture on which Lady Dulverton looked with such gentle tolerance from her bath-chair, and which kept the broad features of

the red-faced coachman in a grin that never relaxed.

Round and round they flashed, now disappearing at the corner where the rhododendron bushes still kept their green leaves, now emerging again with flushed faces and laughing eyes; bending forward, gliding, sailing, swaying, skimming, flitting, all to the ceaseless music of the grinding steel; while the robins sang to them from the branches, the chaffinches flashed above their heads, and the sun smiled from his sky of melting blue as if the jolly old gentleman himself had been a skater in his youth.

Now and then, overflushed and panting, a couple would come skating slowly to the bank, clamber on to the lawn, and then shuffle as best they could to the side of Lady Dulverton's bath-chair.

"Capital, capital!" puffed Sir Thomas March, leaning on the edge of that bath-chair for the second time. "Excellent sport. Ice in splendid condition. And what weather! Capital, capital!"

"I hope," said Lady Dulverton, "your last fall did not hurt you."

"Oh, dear me, no! The merest bump, the merest bump. Something wrong with my skates. Nothing the matter with the ice; ice couldn't be better. I must have these skates looked to. Something or other amiss somewhere."

And then Beatrice would come, with Escott helping her to walk over the snow on her skates, both laughing merrily at their awkwardness, and inquire

whether it was not too cold for Lady Dulverton, and whether she wasn't tired of looking on at their dreadfully bad skating. And Lady Dulverton would be quite sure that Beatrice ought to go indoors and get herself a glass of cherry brandy or sloe gin, and that Escott would be only too pleased to show her where they could be found. And Beatrice would decline the suggestion with the most maddening of pretty smiles, and Escott would assert his most positive conviction that she looked as if she wanted cherry brandy—or, at any rate, sloe gin.

Then back again to the ice, where the rector was sailing off as if he had not seen anything, and where Major Parr, out of his eyeglasses, was surveying Escott as if to say, "I'm rather a decent fellow, haven't you noticed it?" where many a pretty young lady was gliding away with despondency in her heart, and where young Mr. Clarence, with his chin on the top of his impressive collar, was looking as if he didn't care a blow for a girl who preferred a fellow like Escott to young Mr. Clarence. Off they went, Beatrice sailing like a beautiful yacht, Charlie Escott giving chase like a cruiser confident in the superior strength of steam. Now here, now there; now abreast, now parted; now sweeping out of sight beyond the bushes, now disengaging hands as they came into the midst of the skaters again; at last returning from the very farthest corner of the lake to find all the party with skates off, walking and chatting beside the bath-chair, pulled laboriously by the fat coachman towards the

manor-house. Then, of course, Beatrice had to sit on the lonely-looking chair at the edge of the ice, and Escott had to kneel down and undo her skates. Oh, the time he took over the first skate! And yet when he came to the second he seemed like a youth parting from his mother ere he sails away to seek fortune in the great world over seas.

"I don't think you quite understand my skates," said Beatrice at last; "please let me undo this one while you see to your own. We shall never get back to the house before lunch!"

"I assure you," said Escott still looking down, "that I understand every patent skate in the world."

"Then off with it!" laughed Beatrice.

"I am thinking," he answered, still looking down.

"Thinking!" she cried. "But you mustn't think now. You must act."

"Shall I?" he said, his face unseen.

"Please, please," she answered.

"But I may shock you?"

"Not if you are quick."

"Shall I tell you what I have been thinking?"

"Yes, if you promise to be quick in taking off my skate," she answered, wondering why he would so persistently keep his head bent.

"I have been thinking," he said, "that it is perfectly ridiculous for me—with so few opportunities of kneeling before you—to get up off my knees till I have——"

"Lunch is ready!" came the loud voice of Major Parr, ten yards away.

"Damn!" said Escott under his breath.

"Just when he was going to lift his face!" sighed Beatrice.

And then they walked with that confounded Major Parr to the house; and Major Parr would persist in the assertion that he had seen Escott in one of the clubs. Was it the "Rag"? Perhaps, the "Junior"? Perhaps, the "Naval and Military"? Capital club the "Rag." Should very much like Escott to lunch with him there one day. Very good old cognac, sixty years old; best in London.

Damn Major Parr.

At lunch Escott felt himself a perfect fool. Having got on so famously while he knelt at the feet of Beatrice, and having half told the dear girl that he loved her (Oh, damn, damn Major Parr!), he dare not now—while people were talking about game pies and venison and jugged hare, and somebody was asking for pickles, and one of the young March boys was spluttering with his mouth full of mustard—he dare not, I say, utter a word to her, look into her eyes for a fleeting moment. So to cover his confusion, and like a sensible young Anglo-Saxon, he ate turkey with a hunter's appetite, and drank punch with the gusto of three jolly postboys drinking at the "Dragon." He talked to Sir Thomas March about the shameful socialism of the Conservative Government, he discussed Jane Austen with Miss Eversley-Hackett, he asked young Mr. Clarence what he thought of

the weather prospects, and agreed with the rector that Kensit ought to have his head punched. He looked many times towards Lady Dulverton; hoped and hoped that she had not taken cold; told Dulverton that the punch was the best in the world; and—yes, even chopped clubs with Major Parr, and looked with quite a Christian smile straight through the O of that gleaming monocle to the good Major's big threatening brown eye.

After lunch he was the first to load his pipe on the white snow, the first to agree that there should be no more skating that day, the first to second Sir Michael's suggestion that a game of billiards would be excellent good fun. You never saw a man so anxious to appear brisk and cheerful, so determined to make inamorata see that he was no blushing schoolboy. And yet the dear fellow would never, even under cover of his eyelashes and from the corner of his eyes, steal the most fugitive glance at Beatrice. So he went on, laughing, chatting, polite and breezy, merry and thoughtful, now running an errand for Lady Dulverton, now helping a departing guest to struggle into jacket or identify skates; now appearing in the billiard-room to smoke half a cigarette and watch old Sir Thomas (compressing great abdominal superfluity in the most reckless fashion against the edge of the table) make an extraordinarily lucky cannon to the happy escape of the cloth; now returning to Lady Dulverton's elbow in the drawing-room, now singing a song, now overcoming the shyness of one of the

pretty girls to play that jolly little funeral march of the marionette, now helping to pass hot scones and cups of tea to the merry chatterers, and now—now subsiding like a spent runner into a chair beside the silent, solemn Beatrice.

Dear reader, if small talk is a torture to your ears, if you have a passion for neat epigram and brilliant paradox, let us stop our ears and get into the far, far corner of the drawing-room while Lord Escott converses over his teacup with the lovely Miss Haddon.

Or, let us rather take wing and fly far away from this happy scene for a brief moment, to look over the shoulder of Mrs. Whittle, sitting gloomy in her dark chamber reading a letter from Lord Escott's erstwhile friend, the financially perplexed Olley Bolt.

"He wants more money," said the lady to herself, "more money, and he must have it. And I am to wait his time for revenge. I am to be petted by this she-devil, and made to admire the brat that makes my work more and more difficult. I am to smile because she smiles; I am to forget all my wrongs, all her insults; and I am to wait. The time to strike has not yet come. But it will come. He has thought it out. He will strike such a blow at her as will humble her to the dust, and leave me sole mistress of the castle. Will he? will he? And in the meantime money—he must have money."

She rose and stood by the window. "Ah!" she

cried, with set teeth, "there's the old mother who has guessed my secret, and the half-idiot heir to the title! But for that old woman the boy would pine as he did in the Bladen woman's time—before this she-devil came into the castle to bring ruin and disaster. Why can't they let the miserable dwarf die? The other I can deal with. Yes, though he tells me to wait, wait, wait. I will, I will! I'll strangle it, crush it, poison it, steal it, drown it." She turned back from the window, her face livid, her eyes black with smouldering murder.

Away, away! While there is laughter and merriment in Slee-Marly why stand in the gloom with this miserable wretch, dreaming of slaughter, feeding her starved soul on vengeance. And yet, ere we go, while we are still in the castle, let us peep into the room where Lady Mane sits over the fire with her child asleep on her breast. She looks as Iseult of Brittany may have looked when the sleet whipt the pane, and Tristram lay a-dying, dreaming of "that other Iseult fair," Iseult of Ireland. Her cheeks are sunken and pale, she gazes listlessly in the fire. Like Tristram—

There's a secret in her breast
Which will never let her rest.

And as she sits there, pale and listless, one can see that inwardly there is some burning thought consuming like a hot flame all the mind's healthy activity.

Presently she rises, and like Mrs. Whittle, goes

slowly to the window. As she reaches the wide panes, suddenly she nestles the child closer to her breast, and a quick animation darts into her listless eyes. Hatred of the most terrible kind slowly and sullenly overspreads her whole countenance. Very slowly, very sullenly. There is nothing of the housekeeper's quick, furious, almost hydrophobic hate in the deadly calm face of Lady Mane. There, sullenly and silently, looms, as thunder looms from a storm-cloud, implacability of a kind that must have burned its hell fires in the eyes of Lady Macbeth when she muttered—

“That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;
What hath quench'd them hath given me fire.”

With the child at her breast, the bright flames of the fire flinging quick darting red shadows about her tall somber figure, shining now in her loosely coiled hair, burning for a moment against the dark warm skin of her throat—she stands at the window staring over the snow-covered gardens where her mother and her stepson are walking briskly towards the castle.

But it is growing late, growing dark. The rector's pony-carriage has already creaked and bumped over the cobbles in the rectory stables (for the rector had a sermon to write, and Lady Dulverton had promised that someone should look after Beatrice); and Major Parr has given Escott his card, and noted on the back of an envelope the day on which Escott is to try that excellent old brandy

at the "Rag"; and Sir Thomas March, in a great fur-lined coat, with a cigar in his mouth, has subsided into the most comfortable seat on the phaeton, and entrusted his life to the driving of the boisterous boy, whose mouth is still cockled with mustard; and Miss Eversley-Hackett, with her eyeglasses safely on her nose, and under the wing of young Mr. Clarence, who looks as bored as a very old toad surveying the world from a very flat stone, has skipped quite friskily down the drive; and the pretty girls in smart dogcarts, on smart bicycles, or on their own very smart little feet, are all laughing and chatting through the soft twilight of Slee-Marly drive, while the jingle of their skates hanging over their arms rings musically on the still crisp evening air.

And presently from the house comes Beatrice, with a thick brown fur (looking as cosy as a cat on a hearthrug) pressed all round her dear little throat, and even touching the sweet rounded cheek that rivals its own warm softness. And after her, with no overcoat to smother the straight clean-cut lines of his youthful figure, but with his Norfolk jacket tight-buttoned, white woollen gloves on his hands, and (alas for modern romance!) a pipe in his mouth, comes my Lord Escott, shouting back to Dulverton at the door that it is a ripping night, that the ice should be excellent going to-morrow.

The door shuts with a good wholesome reverberating bang; the voices ahead have died softly away, and these two are alone with the night.

There is only the sound of their feet grinding the firm snow, the jingle of her skates, hanging over the arm of iron inside the sleeve of that Norfolk jacket.

The bang of the manor-house door seems to have impressed both man and woman that they are alone—perhaps, that they are purposely alone. The man begins to think that his pipe is something in the nature of a solecism, and he takes it out of his mouth; but the tobacco is exceeding fragrant, and he holds the warm bowl in his woollen-covered hand till the mood shall pass.

The woman thinks that she ought to say something, and remarks in a perfectly unnatural voice—really a quite ridiculously unnatural voice—that it is ever such a nice night.

He makes answer with some incoherent reference to the stars, then coughs as if the remark had choked him, and declares that he feels as if he could walk fifty miles on such a night.

She asks him if he has ever been in a midnight bicycle-party. Her voice is very nearly itself again.

Yes, he has; years ago, when he was at Oxford. Ah! dear heart, what a weary long time ago it seems!

The pipe is back in his mouth. He pulls desperately, till the sullen embers glow again.

Ahead of them shines the red-curtained window of the "Cripple's Ease." The walk is nearly over. The rectory gate is but a few paces beyond that warm red light.

He takes the pipe out of his mouth. "I don't think I ever quite disliked a man so much as I did Major Parr this morning!" he says desperately.

Back goes the pipe again quickly, at express speed.

"Did he bore you very much with his club chatter?" she asks gently.

"I mean when he interrupted me in undoing your skates."

Tinkle-tinkle! cry the skates, chuckling to themselves.

Beatrice is very silent.

Tinkle-tinkle! cry the skates, as if to say: "Go ahead, go ahead! don't waste time; we're all impatience to hear."

"I wish I was on my knees again!" Escott jerks out, breathing very hard.

Was ever silence deeper and more obstinate than that maintained by the beautiful Beatrice?

"I want to say something, and somehow it seems I can't say it on my feet, walking along," he cries boldly, helplessly, grasping the bowl of his pipe till the heat penetrates the woollen gloves and burns his hand.

And now a great hunger to possess the girl at his side, to break down with one giant blow and a great splintering sound, the thin partition that keeps them apart, enters the lover's beating heart and drives all cowardly nervousness before it with its mighty inrush.

"Stop!" he said, coming to a shadowed gateway.
"Don't walk till I've told you!"

Tinkle-tinkle! chuckle the skates; the young master means business this time! If he will let us, we will be still and listen.

She stops, as though half inclined to disobey him. But she looks into his eyes.

"You guess?" says he, bending close to her, speaking very softly, and oh! so very tenderly.

She smiles, and looks slowly, dreamfully away.

Tinkle-tinkle! tinkle-tinkle! tinkle-tinkle! cry the clattering, jangling skates. Such a noise they make that old Timothy, standing in the door of the "Cripple's Ease," steps out into the open, shades his eyes with his hand to protect them from the moonlight, and peers into the lane.

Could his eyes but pierce a little farther, and see into the shadow of the gateway where they stand, he would know why steel is jingling and clashing there like the swords of duelists.

For the skates made all that tremendous din just when Beatrice smiled and turned away, because Lord Escott, not having the power to put his feelings into words, said nothing at all, but simply gathered her into his arms and whispered in love's language (the most musical tongue under heaven!), his secret to her lips.

XXIII

THE WHISPER OF HELL

THE christening of Lady Mane's baby did not thrill the neighborhood until spring was busy with the iris of the dove and the feelings of the young man. There were two reasons for delay. The countess, in the first place, was many weeks regaining her health and good spirits; in the second place, the flower of the aristocracy could not be drawn into the castle at short notice. Hannah was determined that her child should receive his names and his admission into the Anglican Communion with such a ringing of society bells, such a waving of society banners, such a shouting, such a clapping, such a "damned unnecessary hosannah"—as my lord expressed it—as should for all time settle her place in the aristocracy of Great Britain.

So, on the flagged walks in the gardens, where Mrs. Bobby had blown scented tobacco to the stars, where Olley Bolt had uttered epigrams and paradox, and Mrs. Blazer had oft given to the world a liberal view of her ankles, walked at last those really great ones whose names are seldom polluted by appearance in the Society Gossip of fashionable journals. There was, for instance, the beautiful flaxen-haired Duchess of Cronberry, with her daughter, Lady

Victoria; the Duke and Duchess of Mottingham, Lord and Lady Pewsey; the white-haired Marquess of Menhinitt, with the charming young marchioness; the Bishop of Horton and Mrs. Davis; Colonel Shenton, of the Guards; Mr. and Lady Ellen Kinnersley; little black-eyed Lady Allan Jesmond; Mr. Edward St. Austell, M. P.; and Lady Susan Wilkinson. The Duchess of Mottingham was to be the babe's godmother, and the old Marquess of Menhinitt, with Lord Pewsey to share the labor, was to be the infant's godfather. Truly a splendid company! Coming out from the wings into their midst, Hannah was almost blinded by the dazzling glory of the scene, but, to do her justice, let us declare at once, without modification of any kind, that her love for the child was greater than the satisfaction she felt at finding herself in such a noble company.

And, good reader, who of us would not have felt some delight at moving in such society? Trust me, not the author who cries "Vanity! vanity!"—who flings his scorn on the Briton's snobbishness, who professes a fine independence of his betters. He, least of all. Your downright cynic is the worst snob on the stage; and though his attitude before a lord be more pleasing than that of the bowing, scraping, boot-blackening vulgarian—believe me, in his heart he feels as much pleasure in that acquaintance as the other, and that he will introduce the fine name in conversation with his friends quite as deliberately as honest old boot-blackening snob.

Hannah loved these people. She loved them for

their Olympian calm, their soft voices, their gracious ways. She loved to sit still and hear them talk. She loved to sit still and watch them move about. She was like the stone in the brook, over which the cool rippling water streams—part of the scene, but not the smallest of those musical ripples. She knew that by their training, by their environment, by their tradition, these stately people were as different from her as one nation from another. It seemed to her that their thoughts must be always pure, that their acts must be always kind, that their manner must be always what Mr. Matthew Arnold loved (and possessed himself), “the grand.” She could not conceive of the beautiful Duchess of Cranberry in a temper with her maid, of the Duke of Mottingham ever being in a hurry or snoring in his sleep, of Colonel Shenton looking at or addressing the least of women save with the courtesy of a Bayard, nor of the good bishop ever shivering with a bath-towel sawing his plump old back. No; to her it appeared that these people never put off their grand manner any more than an angel puts off his wings. And as the angels would have calmed her mind, so she experienced in the society of her guests a dreamful peace, which flowed over her mind and swept away, for the nonce, all the turbulent evil of her leopard nature.

And the castle at this season, how glorious, how fitting! The Red Cross of St. George, crinkling in the breeze, fluttered above the historic pile as though it knew, and wished all the world to know, that

something weighty was proceeding in connection with the family. The tender green on the trees and in the hedges, the "reviving herb" on smooth lawns and far-flung meadows—every leaf of it, every blade of it seemed purposely donned for the occasion. And there in hedgerow and dim deep greenwood swarmed snowdrops, violets, and primroses—all so clean, so bright, so sweet; while Criddle, stalking about the Edenic gardens, with his knees going on before like buffers of a steam engine, smiled benignantly upon tulip, daffodil, hyacinth, and crocus, and thought of naming his next new rose after the baby sleeping with little clenched fists in the great ivory cradle of the Kyns.

It is not the author's purpose to bore the reader with an account of the christening, a ceremony performed by the bishop with great dignity, nor to relate how Hannah's guests talked at dinner, how they drove hither and thither, how they moved about the beautiful gardens, and how they finally took their departure. We have mentioned their names merely to impress upon the reader's mind, what it is most important he should not forget, that Hannah now occupied a certain position in the Old Guard of the aristocracy, and that she found there a rest for her soul which "the late lamented" never knew and never desired. Having said this, and begging the reader to bear it in mind, we proceed to follow our story at a point some six weeks after the guests had departed.

One afternoon Lord Mane was walking over the

meadows, squinting with gratified eyes, his head thrust forward, at the cattle lying about in great peace and contentment, when little Kyn came forward to meet him.

"Have you lost this, papa?" said the child, holding up an odd-shaped key.

The earl put his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, where he kept his gold toothpick, while with the other he snatched the key from Kyn's extended hand. "Where did you find it?" he said.

"In the wood there."

"Why, Kyn, it's the key to Kyn's Way! I must have dropped it pullin' out my toothpick. But what were you doin' in the wood?"

"Nothing," said the child, wearily.

The earl stooped down, and brought his narrow, blinking face on a level with that of his frail, stunted child. "Ain't you well, Kyn?" he said. "Why do you go mopin' about in the woods and trees? You ain't still lookin' for fairies, are you?"

The boy lowered his gaze. "There aren't such things," he said, with as much pain, perhaps, as a man may suffer deceived by the woman he has loved.

"Of course there ain't. But why do you go creepin' and mopin' about in the woods?"

After a pause the child said: "To forget it."

"Forget there ain't fairies?" queried the father with a hoarse chuckle.

"No, to forget my head. It hurts."

"Where does it hurt, Kyn?"

The boy placed his hand on the top of his cap. "It shoots and burns there."

Something like tears came into Lord Mane's eyes. "Poor little devil!" he exclaimed. "You're like me, Kyn, you're like me. I'll bet a guinea you haven't told your mother or Mrs. Mersey that you've got a pain. Have you, now?"

"No," the boy answered, walking beside his father to the house.

"You're like me, Kyn. All of us are more like animals than the rest of the world. Your uncle was the same, my grandfather was the same, and my father was the only one of the old buck's seven son's who wasn't. We go and sneak away when we've got a pain or a trouble, don't we, eh? We think we don't want any fussin' and coddlin'. We think we don't want sympathy. But we do, Kyn, and you'll have to tell Mrs. Mersey about your headache, an' she'll take it away. An'," he continued, as Hannah joined them, "you found the key to Kyn's Way. That's funny, now. I've never lost that key in my life, an' it's the only one of its kind in the world. When your headache's gone, an' you're grown a big man, I'll show you Kyn's Way, an' you shall have this key when I'm dead and buried." He turned with a grin to Hannah. "Kyn found my key to Kyn's Way! Think of that. It goes from father to son, an' the boy's the first I've heard of who ever took it for himself."

He said a few words about the child's headache, and went off in the direction of the farm. Hannah

took Kyn's hand, and led him away to the house. Arrived in her room she rang the bell and ordered that a groom should be sent to Doctor Reed, asking him to drive out to the castle at his earliest convenience. Then she sat down and drew the child to her knee.

"When did your headaches begin?" she said.

"I've always had them, only they've been bad lately, so bad sometimes they make me cry."

She passed her hands lightly over his body. "You are very thin," she said, and then, leaning back in her chair, she surveyed him critically.

The boy was not lovely to look at. The white, drawn face, the dull, vacant, spiritless eyes, the mouth ever agape, the lank red hair—these could only inspire dislike with the ordinary being, could only be forgotten by such honest hearts as Mrs. Mersey. The boy had the habit, too, of looking in any direction but the eyes of those who spoke to him—a habit that never impresses one favorably in man, child, or dog. His whole attitude was one of slackness—physical and mental. One looked at him, and instinctively straightened one's own back and squared one's own shoulders. Then his voice was tired, and sometimes it sounded as if the child intended to speak indifferently, almost contemptuously.

Hannah looked at him, measured him with her serious dark eyes, and hardened her heart. This, then, was the future Earl of Mane! This stunted, shrunken limb of the ancient tree was to become

the principal bough, and lord it over that stalwart branch sleeping peacefully in his cot upstairs! It was into his hands, those poor nerveless hands, that the key of Kyn's Way was to be given. Omen of evil! he had found that key and restored it to his father. Some day he would possess it, and the great castle itself; and he would bring his wife there, and Hannah and her child would be turned away. No, no! He was a dying child. The doctor would come and tell her that he could not live to manhood. Sir Michael had once said so; Sir Michael thought he would never reach manhood. Bah! what folly to distress her mind with fears of the future. That sturdy son of hers would grow strong and beautiful; he would, perhaps, be tall and straight, like Dulverton, and he would be her knight in the world.

Hannah was pouring out tea in the drawing-room with Mrs. Mersey and Kyn on the sofa when Doctor Reed was announced. He was shown into the room, and immediately acquainted with the cause of his summons.

"You will have some tea?" said Hannah, in her sweet, gracious voice; "and then if you will examine Lord Kyn I shall be grateful. It is too terrible to think of the poor little fellow suffering such pain through his boyhood."

And while the doctor drank tea and ate bread and butter, Hannah displayed such a beautiful solicitude for her stepson's welfare, and spoke so confidently of her own plump babe, that the good doctor was moved to admiration for this charming, modest

creature, and felt, as everybody in the neighborhood felt, that the new countess was really a very noble woman.

After the examination he saw Hannah, by her request, privately.

"Tell me the worst," she said quietly. "I am prepared for it."

"It is a very bad worst," said the doctor, with a sigh.

A great load lifted from Hannah's mind. "He will not live long?" she asked in a voice that seemed to struggle with tears.

"He may live for many years. He may live as long as his father."

Hannah's eyes hardened, and she lowered them quickly.

"You can guess what I mean?" he said, with great sympathy.

"Tell me!" she said, wondering what he had to say.

"I fear for his mind. His body, I think, will grow strong, but his brain is doomed."

"He will go mad?" cried Hannah, looking up, apparently distracted by the intelligence.

"No, I do not say that. But he will always be weak-minded, perhaps very weak-minded. I should recommend you to see a brain specialist immediately, though I fear nothing can be done for the poor child."

Hannah stood before the doctor with bowed head, as though stricken by grief. "Tell me," she said,

"your own opinion. You do not think it will ever be necessary to—to place him——"

He hastened to help her in her sorrow. "Your ladyship, I feel hopeful, need have no fear of that. What will happen, I think, is a gradual, perhaps a very gradual, weakening of the brain. He may be fit to enter society for some years, but he will never be able to use his brain to any great extent. All lessons, for instance, should be discontinued."

For some minutes Hannah remained silent. "But if his body grows stronger is there no hope that his brain, too, may increase in vigor?" She raised her eyes and regarded him calmly.

"That is possible, but only possible."

"Would you give him any medicine?" she asked.

He half shrugged his shoulders. "I will send you a tonic. In the meantime let him do no work, let him spend all his time out of doors, and—if you will allow me—I will telegraph to a brain specialist on my way home."

She thanked him, begged him to do so, and the interview came to a close.

A few days afterwards the specialist arrived, and to the earl and Hannah he told the same tale as Doctor Reed had already told the stepmother. There was hope, a bare hope. In the meantime let the boy be much in the open, do no lessons whatsoever, and—yes, by all means—let him have the tonic. That was all. The wheels of the carriage rolled away, little Kyn ran to find Mrs. Mersey, and the earl, going out of the room with bent head, left Hannah alone with herself.

Oh! the thoughts that writhed and twisted like so many serpents in the mind of Hannah! Dare we peer into that hell-pit? Dare we fix our eyes—eyes that love sunny fields, sparkling rivers, and a world flecked with bright flowers—dare we fix them, I ask, on that seething thought-center where, like the pit of Tophet, evil shapes loom in the blackness crawling over each other, writhing, twisting serpents of evil, the spawn of hell?—

*“Comme dans les étangs assoupis sous les bois
Dans plus d’une âme on voit deux choses à la fois:
Le ciel, qui teint les eaux à peine remuées
Avec tous ses rayons et toutes ses nuées;
Et la vase, fond morne, affreux, sombre et dormant,
Où des reptiles noirs fourmillent vaguement.”*

In every mind sleep these hideous shapes of evil, and even in the pure mind, where they find little sustenance, they do sometimes wake and buffet the soul sorely. Go to the sick bed of saint—delicate woman or man of God—and there you shall hear in the dread hour of delirium words to blanch your cheek and shake reason on its throne. They are there, these evil shapes, in every mind; and once wake them, once bid them commune with you, and—unless God save you—they will rise from that slumber, rise from that dreadful inertia, and never go out from you till they have stripped bare your soul, leaving you as naked as the beasts of the field. The youth looks at venerable age, and says, “I will sow to the devil and get rid of this seed: when my hair is white I shall be like yonder patriarch, the

evil fires burned out, and peace in my soul." But could youth look into the patriarch's hidden soul, how he would shrink back from the abomination of desolation there! For the time does come when even the shining serpents of sin crawl from the mind of man, leaving him only the husks of his soul. For, as the cynic has said, "Unto each man comes a day when his favorite sins all forsake him, and he complacently thinks he has forsaken his sins."

In every mind sleep murder, lust, hatred, and cruelty; and the awakening of these hell-spirits is more frightful and appalling when he who harbors them has had all opportunities of good. Murder waking in the mind of a savage is a wild, dumb devil; but murder waking in the mind of the civilized man is the very soul of Satan. The one is a mad-man, the other a reasoning being.

And Hannah, who had so long listened to the voice of Ambition, whose soul had been drugged by lust of power, whose better self had been slowly drugged to deep sleep in the Lotus-land of gratified desire, found herself now lending a willing ear to the spirit of murder, following all his suggestions with critical discrimination, rejecting this, encouraging that, her whole mind bent on the single end—the destruction of the heir. Never for one moment did she stand aghast at herself. Never once did the good rise and struggle for mastery with the evil. Never once did she cry "Get thee behind me!" She thought not of the evil of the suggestions, but of their practicability. She weighed them as a general

weighs the reasons governing his plan of battle; and, as the soldier thinks not of the slaughter till the smoke has rolled from the battlefield, and the dead are disclosed with glazed eyes turned to the sky of heaven, so she at this moment never once rested her mind on the actual destruction of her stepson. It was the plan of murder, not murder itself, that ruled and possessed her mind.

And Hannah's plan was this. Once every day, in the afternoon, she would add to the child's medicine one drop of the poison she had brought with her from Poyntz Hall. One drop, once a day! And the result would be a gradual, scarce perceptible, weakening of the child's frail hold on life—a slow falling asleep, a quiet, natural dissolution of soul and body. And in the meantime she would neglect her own child, shower all her love and care on the doomed boy, and even at the end watch by his bedside with the tenderest affection. Such were her thoughts, the thoughts of a murderess in spirit—thoughts so frightful that we shudder and turn with loathing away, as if we ourselves had never heard whisper of hell in the quiet of our own souls.

XXIV

STORM

LITTLE Kyn came to Mrs. Mersey one afternoon while that good dame sat on one of the terraces busy with her needle and thread (for the worthy lady had not forgotten her district in the midst of her greatness), and said that he wished to tell her something very important. The boy's manner was so serious that the old lady instantly put down her work, drew her spectacles from about her ears, and looked into his eyes with quick intelligence.

"What is it, little man?" she asked.

"I've seen Mrs. Whittle talking to a man in the woods—a man who used to be here when my other mother was here; and he is a horrid man, a bad man, because I once heard my godfather say so."

"What is his name, dear?" said Mrs. Mersey, drawing the child to her side.

"He is Mr. Bolt; and they were whispering together; and he went one way, and she went another way; and when they had gone I came away."

"But, little man, is this Mr. Bolt a gentleman?"

"Not a real one," said Kyn, after some doubt; "he used to stay with my other mother; but I know my godfather said he was bad, and he was horrid to me."

"Did you hear what he said to Mrs. Whittle?"

Kyn shook his head. "They were a long way off, but they kept turning and looking about just as if they were afraid I was listening. But they never knew I was there, and I didn't come to you till they had gone ever so long."

Now, Mrs. Mersey had her suspicions about the housekeeper, though she had oft seen that grim person cuddling Hannah's babe and professing the greatest admiration for the lusty bantling. Then, too, she remembered suddenly that Bolt was the name of the man who had spoken to Lord Mane in the music-hall. The affair seemed, even to her open mind, somewhat suspicious. At the same time she feared to tell the earl of what Kyn had seen, lest there should be nothing of serious import in the child's narrative, and her interference should be set down to unworthy motives. To tell Hannah would be unwise, as Mrs. Mersey well remembered her daughter's tigerish animosity to the woman in those bad days before the birth of her son, Lord Valentine Rollitt. So our matron concluded her reflections by an injunction to Kyn that he should keep what he had seen secret, and that if he should see anything more of a like kind to be sure and acquaint her with it. "You are a clever little fellow," said Mrs. Mersey, patting the poor dwarf's white face; "and you've got uncommonly sharp eyes. Run away and use them, dear, and your ears too!"

The boy left her with a new sense of joy in his breast. He had been praised! He could be useful!

A few hours after Kyn had told his story to Mrs. Mersey, Lord Escott—now on another visit to Sleep-Marly—was riding back to the Dulvertons' from a long afternoon at the rectory, when, passing the "Cripple's Ease," he looked up to give old Timothy the time of day, and found himself gazing on Olley Bolt. The poetaster lounged against the doorpost, his hat almost touching the lintel, his bulk occupying the whole of the narrow doorway. Seeing Escott, he took the cigarette from his lips and came forward with a dignified smile and extended hand.

Escott, who had carefully avoided Bolt ever since the evening when Olley asked for money, and who had never replied to any of his letters, was doubtful how he should conduct himself on this occasion. He hated the man, hated his face, hated his voice, hated his touch—a thousand times more now that he had come from the society of Miss Haddon; but his instinct as a gentleman, his memories of old friendship, suggested at least politeness. He gave Bolt his hand, and half answered his smile.

"I have not come down here," laughed Bolt, replacing his cigarette, "to beg from you the honor of being your best man. No, my dear Escott, I could never figure in a wedding—not even as the clergyman. But you might have written a line—the least scrap of acknowledgment—after that beautiful letter of congratulation. I took as much pains over its composition as ever I bestowed upon poems for our dear London butterflies. But I will heap no further my reproaches. Behold my hostel—the "Cripple's

Ease"! Is not that a good half-way house for those struggling up Parnassus? Come in, my dear Escott, drink a mug of native cider in my parlor, and flick the ashes of at least one cigarette into my fiber-filled fireplace."

He laid his hand constrainingly on Escott's arm. "Thanks," said our gallant lover, "but I am returning to Slee-Marly, to the Dulvertons'. I am late as it is."

"Then let me walk with you. It is delightful to see you again. It revives a hundred memories of delicious nights—ah! but that is forbidden ground. We must not retrace our steps, eh?"

"I was very young, then," Escott answered.

Bolt laughed. "Is it not in youth that we fall in love?" he exclaimed. "But I would not have you come back. Better that you should marry and establish in the mind of our drunken, swearing, good-for-nothing democracy, the all-important faith that the flower of the British peerage are almost *sans peur*, and altogether *sans reproche*." He laughed again, the deep, scornful, mocking laugh, and looked at Escott. "Come," he cried, "you prosper on Cupid's food. Your face is good traveler-brown, and your eyes have the light that comes from early bed-getting."

"I am very fit," Escott said shortly.

"You walk, my dear fellow, as if you were. Really, too fit. There is such a thing as being too fit. If you keep up this pace I shall have to limp and pant behind you, like a bicyclist's dog."

Escott stopped. "Pray don't let me bring you farther!" He held out his hand, and met Bolt's eyes.

"One word," said Oliver. "Is your attitude towards me—I don't say it is an unfriendly attitude, but it is different from the old one—is it, I ask, inspired by the memory that you once lent me a considerable sum of money, which I have not yet been able to repay?"

"No," said Escott, "it is not."

Oliver smiled. "It is good to know that. I dare say you have heard I am no longer able to keep up with my old acquaintances. The pace of society, like your walking, is too much for me. Society now is very fast. One must be a millionaire to cut even a tolerable figure there. Ha! But I shall get back some day, perhaps. My poems will preserve my place in posterity: my wits will secure me breathing space now. I mean, my dear Escott, to die a very rich man, and leave a cool twenty-thousand to a foundling hospital."

A pheasant got up with a great clatter from the field at their side.

"One of Lord Mane's pets!" exclaimed Bolt. "Odd that such an ungainly, noisy fowl should taste so divinely! By-the-bye, do you know the ugly little man's wife, the pretty, naughty governess?"

"I have met her," said Escott.

"I hope you respect domestic peace!" laughed Bolt. "But I see you are impatient to be off. My scintillations are as wearisome to you as the triads

of Sir Robert Hazelwood were to good Colonel Mannering. A thousand thanks for having let me walk with you. Ah! how you jog memory's elbow! To think of those delicious days, those wild, beautiful nights!"

He laughed, waved his hand sorrowfully, and Escott strode away. "Go back to your tea, coxcomb!" muttered Bolt with a snarl. "The straight, monotonous road of marriage will soon drive you back into the lanes and byways, where men may live without even once thinking of a dissenter. You will dream on the domestic pillow of the ways of your youth; you will lie awake thinking of the hours when life went to music in a giddy dance, when all the beautiful eyes were yours, when you lived unhampered by twinge of superstitious conscience. But now—go back to your tea and bread and butter. Bah!"

Having uttered this beautiful benediction, Mr. Bolt lighted another cigarette, and lounged back again towards his inn. He seemed to have a purpose in being out of doors, for he hung about the gravel square outside the "Cripple's Ease," and occasionally sauntered up towards the castle gates—an apparently aimless exercise which was not by any means a favorite pastime of our gentleman. Presently the object of all this lounging and sauntering seemed to be accomplished. Lord Mane passed, and Mr. Bolt, with well-simulated annoyance at being seen, bent his head, brought his handkerchief quickly to his face, and with much coughing hurried back to the inn. Once inside his room he sank into a

chair, laughed quietly to himself, muttered something about sowing seed, and presently fell asleep over a modern novel.

On the day following, Mrs. Mersey drove away soon after breakfast to attend a meeting of the Vedonshire Needlework Guild at the bishop's palace, where she was to be the guest of Mrs. Davis for that night. It was a stifling hot morning, and the blue of the sky was tinged with a blackness that portended storm. The green of the grass wore that ominous hue that suggests terror, or at least apprehension. The air that hung motionless about the shadowed trees, as if waiting for some terrible event, shuddered every now and then, setting all the green leaves shivering on the quiet boughs. The cattle moved towards the shelter of the trees and left the open meadows bare and exposed. Hardly a bird was to be seen against the threatening sky.

Kyn, upon whose frail body the poison was gradually working, so that he suffered all day from an almost intolerable drowsiness, stole away soon after Mrs. Mersey's departure, and betook himself to the woods. His mind was filled with the prodigious idea that he could be useful, and without knowing why, he was aware that to watch Oliver Bolt and mark that objectionable person's movements was his especial task. So creeping stealthily through the woods,—now crawling under thick brushwood, now manfully fighting his way through a network of blackberry branches,—the brave little boy made his way to the edge of the copse, a point from which he

could obtain a view of the village through the palings. For many minutes the child pressed his pinched face against that moss-speckled fence and searched the narrow horizon afforded by this opening for the object of Mrs. Mersey's alarm. This dreary vigil he would occasionally vary by moving to a spot where he could see the park, and from there watching for Mrs. Whittle. At first the boy was excited by his work, and his senses were keen and awake, but as the minutes passed and nothing came of it, he gradually relaxed in his interest, and slowly drooped and drooped till at last he fell sound asleep.

The bell at the castle had clanged the hour of one over the now darkening scene, and all the laborers on the estate were safe indoors at their dinner talking of the coming storm, when little Kyn opened his eyes and remembered that he had fallen asleep at his post. Miserable and sad, the poor child got upon his feet, rubbed his stiff legs and stretched his stiff arms, and slowly made his way back through the wood. Just as he was about to break from the trees into the park, and so make a short cut to the castle, a slight, scarcely-heard cracking of twigs on his left caused him to pause, and looking in that direction he saw in the far distance the figure of a man clambering over the stone wall that separated the woods from the garden. The boy stopped at once, and, climbing a few feet up a tree, watched the man.

It was Oliver Bolt; the boy recognized the mas-

sive figure, even at that distance. Where was he going? Apparently straight to the house. And there was no one to stop him, no one even to see him. His father and mother would be at lunch in the room which looked to the south; the servants were in the kitchen which faced towards the stables on the other side; and he, this mysterious bad man, was walking boldly towards the little private east door which led straight to the first floor of the house. The boy watched with straining eyes and parched lips the slowly disappearing figure of Oliver Bolt; he saw him reach the door, open it, pass inside, saw his face even as he turned to close the door behind him. Who had opened that door? Who had drawn back the bolts?

He climbed from his tree, struggled on till he reached the park, and then trotting with clenched fists and many a weary gasp over the uneven ground, hurried to the south side of the castle. It was past half-past one when he turned the handle of the dining-room door and presented himself before his parents, tired, hot, scratched, and dirty.

Lord Mane, whose mind had been occupied, ever since his meeting with Mr. Bolt on the previous evening, with the reasons for that undesirable person's presence in the neighborhood (a person, according to Criddle, who was more guilty than Sir Michael Dulverton)—was in a very undesirable temper. His gold toothpick was in his mouth, his eyebrows were knitted, and his face twitched every now and then in a spasm of annoyance.

"Where the devil have you been?" he cried, when Kyn entered the room. "How dare you come in late to meals?"

Kyn looked at his stepmother. "I fell asleep in the woods," he said wearily. "I am very sorry. Shall I go and make myself tidy?"

Lady Mane looked at her husband. The earl called to the footman, pointed with his toothpick to the child, and bade the fellow take his lordship to Mrs. Whittle's room and ask the housekeeper to give him lunch there. "Damme," he concluded, "I won't have these damned railway meals in my house. Take him away."

The footman gave Kyn his hand, and led him to the housekeeper's room. As they went the child did not think about his father's upbraiding; he wondered whether he would see Bolt in the room, and whether that horrid man would be unkind to him. He wished with all his heart that Mrs. Mersey had not gone away.

The footman knocked at the housekeeper's door. There was a pause. No one bade them enter, but presently the door half opened, and the housekeeper stood there, black and inscrutable. The footman gave his message. For a moment the housekeeper seemed as if she intended to defy the earl's command. She stood glaring at the child, studying his face, his disordered clothes, his dirty hands, as though unwilling to admit so disreputable a creature to her room. Then, still standing in the half-opened door, she turned her head, looked back into the

room, and after that drew the child in. "You needn't bring food," she said to the footman; "there's more here than I want."

The door shut, and the boy stood inside the room alone with the housekeeper. She lifted him up roughly, set him upon a chair, placed some chicken before him, which she herself, apparently, had just been eating, and bade him be quick, for she had no time to waste.

The frightened child ate what he could, every morsel almost choking him, and scarcely dared to raise his eyes from the plate. He wondered whether Oliver Bolt was standing behind him, or whether that bad man was under the table. He glanced furtively under his eyes at the curtains by the window, at the cupboard in the corner, at the box against the wall. At last, dropping his fork upon the plate, he said he wanted no more food, and slipped off the chair. Mrs. Whittle followed him to the door.

"Go and play in the schoolroom," she said, "and don't hang about the corridors in those dirty clothes."

Glad to be out of that haunted room, where he had hardly been able to breathe freely, Kyn hurried down the corridor, turned into the main gallery, where his mother's room was situated, and then, slackening his pace, walked slowly towards the schoolroom. Half-way down the corridor he turned round to look behind him, and there at the end, watching his progress with impatient eyes, stood the housekeeper. Kyn turned away his gaze and continued his walk.

But when he came opposite the great staircase he encountered his father. The earl looked half ashamed of himself, and beckoned the boy to his side. Surprised by the sudden change in the old man's manner, the child went to him.

"How's the head, Kyn?" said the repentant earl.

"Better, thank you," the child said.

"An' what are you goin' to do now?"

"Mrs. Whittle said I was to go to the school-room."

"But you've got no one to play with, have you? There ain't no Mrs. Mersey to play with you to-day. Well, suppose I give you a treat? What d'ye think of that, now?"

The boy looked up, then his gaze wandered away. "I think it would be nice," he said doubtfully.

"Come on, then," cried the father, and taking the child's hand they went on down the corridor, and turned off abruptly to the left some few yards before they reached the end.

"Now for some real fun, Kyn!" chuckled the earl. "You and I are goin' to have a game all to ourselves. Don't tell anyone. It's a secret. A secret between you and me."

As he spoke the narrow passage was suddenly illuminated with white dazzling light, and almost at the same moment a roar of distant thunder woke the slumbering echoes of the castle.

"The storm's begun," said the earl. "You and I'll play together till it's gone. We'll have a jolly afternoon together, me and you. Now look at that,

Kyn," he said, pointing to a door at the end of the passage. "Have you ever tried to turn that handle, ever been inside that door?"

"No," said the child.

"No, I should think not," chuckled the earl, fumbling in his waistcoat pocket. "No one ever goes here but me. No one ever opens this door but me."

"Is it Kyn's Way?" asked the child with great delight.

A distant growl of thunder rolled sullenly away. "Ay, boy, it's Kyn's Way. A rare place for a game! 'A rare place for fairies!'" He produced his key, inserted it in the lock, and then with a tug pulled open the door. This door was of extraordinary thickness, like the door of an enormous safe; it was lined with steel, and it fitted so tightly as to make the closet which now stood before them almost air-tight. Opposite this door was another, a door of equal thickness which opened inwards by means of a large central bolt, and disclosed what looked like a small stone chamber—a room something like that shown to the inquisitive traveler at Kenilworth as the chamber where poor Amy Robsart waited for Leicester. It was dimly lighted by a long narrow loophole in the stone walls many feet out of human reach, and at its farther side was an archway leading to the stone tunnel built into those mighty walls.

A flash of lightning danced round this little chamber where they stood, and Kyn, trembling in the stillness and gloom of the apartment, clutched his father's side and cowered there like one sore terri-

fied. There was something unearthly in the chamber, something of the tomb in its appearance and atmosphere. Even the earl, who had not opened those grim doors for nearly thirty years, felt the thrill of the scene, and laid a sympathetic hand on his child's head.

"We want a light, Kyn, don't we? It ain't dreadful and creepy in the light. Come along, an' we'll get a taper." They went back to the passage, and there the earl told Kyn to wait while he went for a light. But the child begged to be taken, saying he did not like to be left there alone, and the earl, leaving the doors open, gave the boy his hand, and they went down the corridor together.

Entering the main gallery they came across the countess walking from the nursery to her room. She seemed surprised at first to see Lord Mane with the child, but quickly recovering herself, patted the boy's face with a sweet smile. "Don't forget to come for your medicine at five o'clock," she said gently, while a roar of thunder rolled angrily over their heads; and then, turning to the earl, she whispered with much tenderness, "I am so glad to see you with him. Poor little fellow."

The earl winced, for he did not like anyone, particularly his wife, to think him guilty of gentleness or—as he would have called it—sentimental weakness. The countess went on to her bedroom, and the earl, with Kyn, continued his journey.

It did not take Lord Mane many moments to arm himself with a few tapers, but just as he was leaving

his study a message came from the farm bailiff, and my lord was obliged to leave the boy while he went to attend to this business.

In ten minutes he returned. "Haven't kep' you long, little man," he said. "I ain't goin' to let business interfere with our holiday! Ain't it fun, Kyn? You an' me playin' together!" He stopped and looked with rough affection at the boy. He wanted to say how sorry he was that in a moment of ill-temper he had spoken harshly to the child at lunch; but apologies do not come easily from men of the earl's nature, and this handsome sentiment died at birth in my lord's mind. However, he did say: "You an' me, Kyn, are goin' to be friends always. We're goin' to have some fine rides together, you see if we don't; an' I'll show you the farm every day, an' you shall have some bantams for yourself, an' some doves, an' a guinea-pig, an' a white rabbit. What d'ye think of that, now?"

His little green eyes blinked and watered as he ran over the glorious future awaiting his son. The boy very gracefully slipped his poor hand into his father's, and nestled for a moment against his side.

"That's all right," said the earl; "you an' I understand each other, eh? Now then, come along, an' we'll go all roun' the castle inside the walls. Won't that be funny, now?"

He lighted one of the tapers, and giving the boy his hand went out from the room. The rain was descending in torrents, the sky was black, and

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louder and louder grew the thunder as the storm closed in over the darkened castle.

"Ain't it a storm, Kyn!" chuckled the earl; "what a day for Kyn's Way! We shall be safe there, old boy; nothin' can get at us there, not lightning nor thunder."

With many a chuckle he climbed the stairs, holding the taper before him, and looking only at the step just ahead of his progress. But Kyn, with the impatience of youth, looked to the top of the broad staircase, and, as he fixed his eyes there, suddenly out of the gloom, with sharp, shining eyes and agitated face, came the housekeeper, Mrs. Whittle. She stood behind the white marble balustrade, leaning over, watching the unsteady, pale flame of the taper—a black, gaunt, spectral figure, lit every now and then into vivid life by a white, dazzling flash of lightning.

Scarcely had Kyn noticed her than she began to descend the staircase rapidly, the great, broad staircase forbidden to all menials, whatever their degree, when once the family had risen from sleep. She came down quickly, her eyes, burning like black diamonds, fixed upon the earl. He looked up suddenly, and stopped dead.

"What d'ye want?" he demanded.

"Send him away," she whispered, motioning to the child, and speaking in a voice of dread import. "Send him away. Quick! He must not hear or see."

"What d'ye want? Speak, damme, speak!"

She bent her head to his ear and whispered.

The blood went from his face. The taper shook in his hand like the leaf of an aspen. His jaw dropped; his eyes stared before him like those of a dead man.

The housekeeper gripped Kyn's arm, turned him swiftly round, and bade him go down to the hall and wait there. The boy did as she bade him. Once again she stood by the earl's side.

"I may be wrong," she whispered, "but I heard voices. I heard her ladyship lock the door. None of the servants have heard or seen anything. There need be no scandal. It may be nothing after all; go quickly."

A tremendous clap of thunder broke over the house, splintering itself into a thousand separate roars.

The earl dashed forward. "I know who it is! I know who it is!" His stupor vanished; the baleful fires of jealousy flashed in his green eyes, and groaning like a man in pain, he rushed before the housekeeper down the long gallery, his taper flinging tragic lights on the darkened walls and the shadowed statues as he swept forward to his wife's room.

XXV

KYN'S WAY

WHEN Hannah left Lord Mane and Kyn in the corridor, she proceeded immediately to her boudoir. As she walked slowly forward the reverberating growl of a long-drawn peal of thunder rolled ominously in her ears. For the first time she thought of the storm in connection with her crime. The anger of the heavens, the darkness of the corridor, oppressed and frightened her. She moved forward, wondering whether it could be possible for the elements—the wild, mysterious elements!—to be influenced by human actions. The idea seemed to her so absurd that at its very statement the cloudy hypothesis vanished from her mind.

Opening her door, she was almost blinded by a flash of lightning that shot like a flame of fire through the leaden-colored glass and flooded the room with light. Ere she had closed the door, thunder of the most terrifying kind answered the flame—splitting, cracking, roaring—and then rolling itself away in majestic sullenness. Hannah, with trembling hand, turned on the electric light. Then she locked the door.

On the table in the center of the room stood Kyn's medicine; beside it a medicine glass. Hannah went

first of all to her bedroom, which opened out of the boudoir, and then returned to the table with the little round bottle of poison in her hand. She set this down, and took up the glass and the medicine. She held the glass up to the darkened window, through which could be seen the reflection of the globe of light hanging mysteriously in the blackness outside, and then, very carefully, she poured the medicine into the glass, measuring the dose with great accuracy. She paused for a moment, looking out on the black scene, watching the great lines of rain streaming down upon the earth, looking even at the dull reflection of herself standing there with the medicine in her hand, and then she went back to the table. She replaced the bottle of medicine, and sitting down, took up the bottle of poison.

She pushed her chair some few inches from the table, leaned forward, so that her face was on a level with the glass, and then gently tilted the bottle of poison over the glass. A flash of lightning danced across the room as the fatal drop struck the medicine and was lost in the liquid. Hannah jumped hastily up, clutching the poison in her hand, terrified by that ominous flash. Thunder now crashed threatenings in her ears—thunder that seemed to burst but an inch above her head, and stab with a thousand daggers into her very brain. She was frightened. Thoughts of the danger she incurred forced themselves upon her mind. She stood in the room, beside the poisoned glass, gazing with clouded brow through the dark windows. Her

breath came quickly; her heart beat apprehensively. Dread of some mysterious evil that was near her, in the very room with her, possessed and mesmerized her faculties. She looked swiftly round the room; at the curtains by the windows; into the darkness of her bedroom, seen through the open door; at the bookcase on her right; at the lounge on her left; then behind her at the door. No! there was no one there. She turned round again; then she stood transfixed with horror.

The poison fell from her hand and spilled itself upon the floor, the bottle rolling away under the table. Her hands were caught up at her breast, her eyes stood out from her head, and her white lips were apart in the keenest throes of terror.

"I have caught you!" Bolt said, coming forward. "Yes, it's all over now. I promised you we two should meet again. You remember?"

She could only stare at him with those panic-stricken eyes, her hands clutching at her breast. He had caught her; she had lost everything.

He, on his part, could not imagine why his presence there had robbed her of all self-possession. He had expected, and had been prepared for, a sudden rush to the bell, a violent denunciation, a contemptuous dismissal. His plan was only to keep her in that room with him, the door locked, till Mrs. Whittle brought the earl to discover them. This deadly white, gasping, gaping woman, standing there before him voiceless and motionless, perplexed him, filled him with doubt, and swept the words he

had intended to say out of his wondering mind.

He came close to her and took her wrists in his hands, forcing them down to her side. Still holding them there, he brought his face to hers, so that he felt her gasping breath upon his cheeks, and answered her fixed stare with a glance as steady and of far deadlier meaning. It was the intent gaze of a hound; her's, the wild glance of the bleeding deer.

"Vaulting ambition," he hissed, "doth o'erleap itself. You dreamed too much. You looked too high. You came across my path. And now this is the end! Do you understand?—this is the end! All your castles have tumbled to the ground, my heel is on them, grinding them to dust! I like to tell you this now, because we shall never see each other again, and you would never know why I have schemed to bring you from your throne. This is my revenge. You interfered with my plans; you schemed against my schemes. And this is the end!"

He laughed scornfully, gripping her wrists fiercely, while his sneering face was pressed close to her own. The lightning leaped into the room, flashed upon those two figures standing there all but motionless in the center of the apartment, and then died out of sight at the first roar of thunder. Bolt laughed gaily, but with scowling brows.

They were standing thus when the handle of the door was turned noisily. "Your hour has come!" Bolt whispered, swinging her suddenly back, then drawing her swiftly forward to him again.

There was a loud knock at the door. "Open!" cried the voice of the earl.

"They have come!" said Bolt. "Shall I let them in, or will you?"

"Open, open!" cried the earl, kicking at the panel.

"I had better go, perhaps," whispered Bolt. "It will seem more knightly. Pray stand where you are. You look delightfully tragic. If only the lightning flashes when he enters and the thunder roars when he takes you in his arms!"

"Damme, will you open?" shrieked the earl, kicking at the door fiercely.

"The old gentleman's in a devil of a hurry to get at you!" said Bolt, walking to the door.

Directly his back was turned, Hannah stretched out her arm, seized the poisoned medicine, threw the liquid upon the floor, and then silently slipped the glass back upon the table. She had scarce done this, when, turning her head, she saw the door opening, and her husband rushing in with a lighted taper in his hand, the figure of Mrs. Whittle looming darkly behind.

He stood there trembling all over—Bolt before him, as if to restrain him from rushing upon her—and he glared at her with a ferocity human countenance can never express till the whole mind is twisted and distorted by the most terrible passion.

"Your wife, my lord," said Bolt, in a theatrical voice, "is innocent. I swear it."

"Who locked this door?" he cried, breathing hard, looking at her fiercely, the taper flickering in his shaking hand.

"My lord," began Bolt, "appearances are, I admit, against Lady Mane, but——"

He stopped abruptly. There was a cry of "Mamma" from the corridor outside. The figure of Mrs. Whittle vanished from the open door. There was another cry, but it was quickly smothered; then came sounds of a faint struggle, then silence.

"Who locked this door?" demanded the trembling earl. It seemed to be the only idea in his mind, the only sentence he could utter. His face was a ghastly white; his eyebrows twitched; his lips worked in a very frenzy of rage.

"Who locked this door?"

"My lord," said Bolt again, "I am perfectly willing to admit that you have every justification for your——"

"Who locked this door?" he cried, never taking his eyes from the stricken gaze of his wife.

At last she found speech. "What does it all mean?" she stammered, the words jerked from her white lips. "I am innocent. I can explain."

"You hear," said Bolt, "her ladyship can explain everything. Appearances, my lord, are—I have said it, and I willingly admit it—dead against her, black against her."

"I'll listen to your explanations," said the earl suddenly, a new light in his eyes. "You shall tell me why this door was locked. But not here. We will go where we cannot be overheard. Follow me!"

He went out of the room, the taper held high in

his hand, and Bolt motioned Hannah to follow him. The distracted woman rushed past the smiling villain and hurried after the earl.

"I can explain everything," she said quickly. "There is some terrible mistake. Some dreadful plot against me. What do they accuse me of? Tell me what they say?"

"Silence!" he snarled, wheeling round upon her. "Would you have all the servants for an audience?"

So they went down the long corridor, the earl first, with the taper trembling in his hand, Hannah following almost at his side, and Bolt last, lounging along with a satisfied smile on his dark evil countenance. As they went the thunder rolled over their heads, and the distant window at the end of the corridor was lit up with quick flashes of vivid lighting.

The earl turned off on the left and glanced round with a fierce, tigerish gaze to see if they were following. They went on, this grim procession, till they reached the open door of Kyn's Way. Hannah had never been in this part of the castle before, but she was too distracted to notice where he led her, and walked forward, thinking, thinking, thinking of the evil that had so suddenly befallen her, and of how to extricate herself from the toils of the villain behind her.

The earl went forward into the little stone apartment, and stood at the door as they passed in.

"We shall be private here!" he said fiercely. "No one will interrupt us; no one will overhear us.

Stand there, both of you!" He pointed to the farther side of the chamber.

They both obeyed him, and as they went forward he suddenly seized the door, flung the taper into Bolt's quickly turned face, shrieked "Kyn's Way!" and then swung the door to with a heavy, echoing clang. He listened for a moment, but no sound came through that heavy door. Then he went out, shut the other heavier door, locked it with the key that was still in the lock, and after that descended quickly to his own private room, and locked himself in.

He had not been there long, however, before there was a knock at the door. He rose with an oath, opened it, and faced Mrs. Whittle.

"What has happened?" she said.

"They've gone."

"Gone! What do you mean? Gone!—those two! Where have they gone?"

"Gone to the devil, where you may go too!" he cried fiercely, stamping his foot. "Am I to answer as many damned questions as you choose to ask? Go to the devil!"

He swung the door in her face, locked it, and then rang his bell.

In a few minutes our old friend William rapped at the private sliding panel, and was admitted. The young fellow started back when he saw his master's deadly pallor, and marked all the evidences of his extreme mental excitement.

"I don't want dinner to-night," said the earl,

staring at him fiercely; "and the countess don't want it, either. Bring me a couple bottles of whisky, and look sharp."

When William returned with the whisky the earl was lighting his oil lamp, for it was only in this isolated room that the electric light was not placed, and as the servant entered he turned round and bade him see that no one came to disturb him.

"I'll see no one—no one," he said, with the same strange ferocity. "When I want you I'll ring, an' don't you come before. Mind that!"

The servant retired, and the earl locked the door after him. Then, flinging himself suddenly upon the ground, the old man sobbed like a child over a broken toy. The light in his life had gone out; the tardy happiness that had come to him in these last months had been snatched away. There was nothing to live for.

XXVI

KYN'S WAY

AS the door of Kyn's Way clanged noisily to, and Oliver Bolt found himself prisoned there like a rat in a trap, he sprang forward, picked the still burning taper from the floor, and hastily searched every part of the steel-covered door for some means of escape. The taper was burning low, and he knew that soon the dreary stone chamber must be plunged in darkness. With feverish eagerness, like a madman seeking exit from his cell at the cry of "Fire!" this terrified man flashed the flickering taper first here, then there, the disengaged hand passing rapidly over the smooth steel surface, seeking for some secret means of regaining his freedom.

Hannah stood behind him, watching his movements with lack-luster eyes, her arms at her side, her face still pale, but freed at last from the dread strain of her paroxysm of terror. She watched him without interest of any kind. She was untouched by his feverish movements, unmoved by his frequent curses and mutterings. She saw the taper burn down till the flame seemed to stand upon his thumb; and she marked him lower his hold of it, so that he held the dwindling wax between the nails.

of his thumb and forefinger. She saw him kneel to the ground, and grope there; saw him rise up, and stretch his agitated hand to the top of the door. Every swift movement of those nervous fingers she saw and marked, but without knowing why he did them, or why she should be standing there watching him.

He turned suddenly round and faced her. "What devil's trick is this?" he cried fiercely, the sweat running from his brows and streaming down his cheeks. "When will he come back? Why has he locked us in here?"

She looked, but made no answer. What were these questions he asked her? Who had locked them in? And where were they locked in?

"Speak, damn you, speak!" he cried, coming towards her. The taper fell to the ground, and left them in darkness. "Answer me," he cried; "why are we locked in here? When will he come back?"

Still no answer.

"I'll kill you!" he burst out fiercely. "Find your tongue, devil, or I'll strangle you."

A flash of lightning shot through the narrow loop-hole high in the vaulted chamber, and, realizing that she was threatened, and seeing at that moment the archway leading to the tunnel, she sprang to it, eluded his grasp, and ran on before him, striking her hands, and sometimes her shoulders, against the narrow walls as she raced into the darkness.

At last she paused, and stood listening. The

darkness frightened her, the close atmosphere stifled her. She could not tell where this passage led, or what pitfalls might be yawning before her in the heavy blackness. The atmosphere was that of a tomb; there was an unearthly dampness, a mysterious heaviness there that had some appalling effect upon her nerves. The smell of brick-dust entered her nostrils and her throat, drying up her mouth, and leaving her there gasping, even fighting for breath.

While she waited and looked back a tiny light suddenly jumped out of the darkness, and she saw that Oliver Bolt had struck a match and was carefully feeling his way through the tunnel. She went down on her hands and knees and crawled forward. The darkness seemed to deepen in its impenetrability, the atmosphere to increase in its terrible siccidity. She gasped for breath, the tears of suffocation in her eyes; but, fearful of the danger behind, she went steadily on groping her way over the dank, rough floor, straining her eyes for some glimmer of light in the distance.

Then he called to her; at first quietly, afterwards loudly, fiercely, threateningly. The tones of his voice brought back sudden remembrance. The scene in the boudoir flashed across her mind: the appearance of the earl: the sudden disappearance of the listening housekeeper: the smothered cry and struggle in the corridor: the journey behind the earl down the long gallery with this man behind her: the open door: the stone apartment: the taper

hurled towards them: the shout of "Kyn's Way!": the clang of the door.

She began to realize what had happened. This man creeping after her through the darkness, calling to her, shrieking to her, threatening her with death, had plotted to ruin her by precisely the same means as those by which the earl's first wife had been irretrievably ruined. He knew nothing of the poison. Fool, fool! it was her own guilty conscience had betrayed her. Why had she not acted better? Why had she not screamed for help, rung the bell, shattered the windows—done anything to prove to those about the castle that she was in distress? She reproached herself bitterly, and crawled forward swiftly.

She reached a dead wall; her heart failed her with terror. She passed her trembling hands over it, but could find no door, no outlet. At last she discovered on her left a blank, then a step, leading down somewhere. Rising to her feet, she descended—feeling her way carefully as she went. Seven steps, and then a sharp turning to the right, and once more there was a little stone chamber with a slit high up in the stone, an archway in front conducting on to a continuation of the tunnel.

Here there was air, blessed cooling air, and she drew it gratefully to her lungs. The chamber, too, was lighter than the other, although it was only indistinctly that she could see the archway. She ran back to the bottom of the steps and listened. There was no sound. She reclinbed them and

peered down the tunnel; there was no sign of a light. He had gone back, back to that locked door, to hammer for help, to search again for means of escape. She drew a breath, and leaned against the wall. The minutes dragged by; an hour passed as she stood there—to her it seemed a year.

Could it be possible, she asked herself, that the earl had locked them in this dreadful place, meaning them to die there? No one had seen him lead them to the door; no one had seen him close it. He could say they had left the castle together. He could prevent search being made in Kyn's Way till they were both dead. The sweat broke out upon her brow, and the tears sprang into her eyes.

Lightning shot through the narrow loophole, and lit up for a single instant the massive stone walls, the broken and uneven stone floor, the tunnel leading onwards round the castle. Then the mighty answer of the sky rolled itself out across the heavens and filled her terrified mind with its awful echoings. She listened spell-bound, and then, as the last murmur rolled distantly away, a yell broke upon her ear—a fierce, wild, maniacal yell—the yell of a man bereft of his reason. And after that she heard the sound of feet in the tunnel, and knew that her pursuer had renewed his chase.

She sprang to the archway, in her panic discarding all precautions against being dashed to pieces, and ran with the winged feet of terror forward into the black darkness of the mysterious tunnel. His yell pursued her, echoing along the walls as if a

hundred fiends were chasing a lost soul to hell; echoing high above her head, in her ears, under her feet—now wild and defiant, now mocking, now in the wailing accents of despair. She went on, with arms outstretched before her, panting through the arid air, choking, gasping, groaning in her agony. On and on, with that horrid yell pursuing her, till she reached another dead wall, another flight of steps leading down on the left hand. With no care of any kind she sprang to the bottom, fell upon the stone floor, and lay there stunned and motionless. But even in those brief moments of unconsciousness the cry of her pursuer was in her ears, and when she roused her faculties, and staggered to her feet, it was close—fearfully close—it seemed, indeed, to her distorted fancy that she could have put out her hand and touched it.

She moved forward again, groped her way into another stone chamber, stood before the archway with heaving bosom and gasping lips, and looked back to the darkened stairs on which the light from the narrow aperture in the walls shed the gray light of gloom.

Her limbs ached; one of her feet was burning as if a fire glowed there, and so great was her anguish that, in despite of the danger incurred by waiting, the countess leaned against the wall of the darkened tunnel and looked steadfastly at the gloomy stairs.

The cry drew nearer; it was the cry of a madman—fierce, soulless, meaningless, and yet charged

with some awful passion of the mind, inspired by some inconceivable thought. A violent shudder shook the frame of Hannah; still she leaned nerveless against the wall, and looked at the stairs. Lightning flashed into the chamber that must have revealed her standing there had Bolt appeared in the chamber at that moment. Thunder drowned the cry, crushed it into silence under the force of its terrific anger; but as it rolled away, the cry arose again—louder, fiercer, nearer—and then, of a sudden, he dashed into the chamber, stumbling down the stairs and standing there in the center of the apartment—his hair disheveled, his face white as death—gasping like one terrified and rolling his eyes in a manner indescribably horrible.

The shock of this revolting vision overcame Hannah's weariness. She turned and, with a cry of alarm, fled for her life. The sound of her voice so near maddened him; he sprang to the archway, and rushed headlong into its swallowing darkness.

She heard his cry close behind her; she could hear the noise of his feet on the stones, even his hard stertorous breathing.

It was too late now. She staggered, and then swayed to the left. But instead of meeting the walls, where she had desperately hoped to squeeze herself while he flashed past, she found herself moving, or rather stumbling, onwards down another gallery—a gallery wider than the other, and, if there be comparative blackness, blacker too. On she went, stumbling and half falling, till her body

could bear it no longer. She sank down upon the floor, swayed herself with a groan close to the wall, and as the echo of his maniacal yell died upon her ears, fell into merciful unconsciousness.

Night had long descended upon the castle when Hannah awoke from her swoon and opened her eyes to stare dreamfully upon the circumambient darkness. At first she could not recall the terrible scenes she had passed through, and imagined that she had awoke in her bed in the midst of the night. A soft wailing cry stole to her ears, and she sat up quickly, imagining that it was her child calling to her.

At that moment memory returned. She shivered, and clasped her hands together, straining forward to catch the notes of that sad, wailing cry. There was no madness now, no threat, no fury. It was a pathetic sobbing sound—the whimpering cry of a child unable to sleep.

She crawled slowly back down the gallery, turned into what she considered the main tunnel, and remained there listening. The cry was on her right, and she went on till she could just descry in the darkness ahead the grayness that denoted the stone chamber with its narrow loophole.

Very silently, very slowly, she continued her painful progress, till at last she could see into the room. There, on the center of the floor, kneeling as if in prayer, was Oliver Bolt, his ghastly face upturned to the narrow window high up in the wall. His hands were clasped in front of him, and worked

backwards and forwards—from his chin downwards. His eyes were filled with tears; his lips were trembling.

“Come back,” he wailed, “come back! I won’t hurt you. I want you to speak. I want to hear your voice. I will be very kind. Oh! come back, come back!”

He repeated those words in a slow, monotonous wail; the hands rocking to and fro, his face kept immovably to the narrow embrasure, through which flittered the gray-blue light of a cloudless night.

She was fascinated by the sight, and could not remove her eyes from the terrible spectacle. The minutes went by, the light lost its blackness, and gradually the beams of the eastern sun mingled in that shaft of light, and illuminated the circular cell with the freshness of morning.

But instead of bringing hope to the man kneeling there, this soft, warm light seemed to rob him of the last vestige of control. He burst into tears, clasped his hands over his eyes, and fell forward on the floor, sobbing as if his heart were broken.

Hannah looked on unmoved. She could see the heaving of his broad shoulders, and could hear the muttered prayers that slipped from his sobbing lips. She lay upon the ground watching him, her eyes tearless, her self-possession unshaken by his utter collapse.

She began to think of the future. How should she explain his presence in her room when the earl

returned? Fool that she had been, to meet the earl with guilt on her face, to be caught there like a bird in a net—dumb and unnerved! Oh, to get that hour back! How differently she would act. She began to play the scene in her imagination. Her loud cries for help, her struggle with Bolt, her efforts to drag his smothering hand from her mouth. She set her teeth, imagining that she was biting his flesh, then she heard his cry of pain; she rushed past him, reached the bell, rang it violently, and cried again to her husband. Oh, how easy it seemed! Oh, what a fool she had been!

But what should she say when the earl came to release her? Nothing on earth could remove from his mind the impression left there by her guilt-stricken face, her dumbness under his fierce questioning. She must invent something; she must think. And so while Oliver Bolt lay on his face in the circular stone room, with the light of morning streaming down upon him, his sobs growing fainter and fainter,—she, lying in the darkness of the tunnel, her body racked with pain, acted the great scene of reconciliation. She pictured herself at the earl's feet, pleading to his generous heart, vowing her innocence, demanding the investigation of Oliver Bolt's action. She went through all the speeches, placed answers in the mouth of the earl, and ended it all with the complete vindication of her honor, a triumphant return to the old happy life.

But suddenly it struck her that the earl might never come there, that she might be left alone with

this madman till she too lost reason, or life. The thought renewed her torture. She knew the jealousy of her husband, knew that his mind was capable of terrible things. He was different from ordinary men, and he nursed revenge, loved to inflict torture on those who wronged him. He would never come to let them out.

Perhaps he had killed himself! God! perhaps he had killed himself, and none knew that she was buried alive in these walls!

She rose from the ground, stood upon her feet, and then swept swiftly towards the chamber. She went to the prostrate form of Oliver Bolt, knelt down, and shook him. He was asleep. She shook him again, fiercely, wildly, and called to him to wake. Again and again, with animal ferocity, she shook the sleeping man, till at last he opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I have something to say," she cried; "listen!"

He sat up, and stared at her with moody eyes.

"Do you want to die here, to live in these walls till you die of starvation?" she demanded.

"Why not?" he replied.

"Don't you want to live, to regain the fresh air, the light—your freedom?"

"Can it be done?"

"Supposing the earl has killed himself and no one knows we are here!" she said breathlessly.

"I thought of that last night. It is most probable."

"And you lie here doing nothing! We must

rouse them. We must make them hear us. Get up and help me! Quick! quick! every moment must be saved."

"I made enough noise last night to rouse the dead. The living will never hear us. Shriek your loudest and it will sound to the gardeners below like the feeble chirp of a bird. This is our tomb. Go to sleep, and let the world pass by us. You are buried alive. Behave like a decent corpse, do."

"You are coward as well as villain!" she retorted, rising to her feet.

"I am wiser than you, that is all. If you have plans for rousing the castle set about them at once, only let me sleep. I am hungry, and I want to forget that fact."

"We shall die of starvation!" she wailed.

"Or of cold," he replied, shivering.

"I will dash my head against these walls rather than that!" she cried fiercely.

"Even that will be unheard in the castle. Why not try and die quietly?"

He spoke as a sleepy man answers a summons to awake, drowsily, with protestation.

"You have brought me to this," she hissed.

"And myself, egotist," he answered with a yawn.

"Coward, villain!" she cried; "get up and help me! You shall not lie there, like a dog. Get up, I say, get up, and come with me to the door!"

"The sun warms me here," he answered. "I have done enough tunneling to suffice till I die. No, I shall die here, not at the door."

He exasperated her beyond her powers of endurance. She struck him in the mouth with her foot.

Instantly he was on his feet, his hand at her throat, and had driven her back against the wall.

"You devil!" he cried, the blood flowing from his mouth to his chin. "I will kill you for that!"

"Kill me!" she gasped. "Squeeze harder! throttle me!"

But he struck her across the face, a numbing blow, and released her. They stood facing each other. The woman's face white, save where the mark of his hand burned on her cheek; the man's, white save where the blood trickled slowly down his chin.

Then she began to weep. "Save me! oh, save me!" she cried; "I want to live. I want to get back to the world."

"You will never get back," he answered. "Your husband is dead; they are concerned with him; no one gives you a thought. You must die. Nothing can alter it."

"I will not die!" she cried; "I tell you I will not die. I will pull these stones down——"

"With a hair-pin!" he snarled. "Set about it now—only in some other part of our tomb. I object to being buried with such a rebellious corpse. Why can't you lie quiet like the rest of us?"

But she turned away, and hurried with tears and groans through the black tunnel towards the first stone chamber and the heavy, steel-covered door.

XXVII

KYN COMES TO THE RESCUE

SIR MICHAEL DULVERTON was in a testy mood. The post-bag had brought him further evidence of the hopelessness of all his efforts to reunite the political party in whose principles he had been bred, and in whose mission he had absolute and unwavering faith. The members of the party were at loggerheads, leaders were weighing every word and waiting for the wind to blow, while he himself—implored by the most influential section to play a more prominent part—could not, owing to that one stain on his honor, ever lead his party in the vigorous onslaught that could alone unite them in one common purpose.

Sir Michael was testy. He talked bitterly of his political friends at breakfast, ridiculed the leaders, laughed with the enemy, and finally concluded with the assertion that he would forsake St. Stephen's, and, like another famous member of his party, cultivate his own fireside. Then, to crown all, he quoted the triumphant "Last Word" of Matthew Arnold:—

"They out-talked thee, hissed thee, tore thee,
Better men fared thus before thee,
Fired their ringing shot and passed,
Hotly charged, and sank at last.

“Charge once more, then, and be dumb,
Let the victors when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall.”

He laughed, kissed his mother, told her to take no notice of his nonsense, and with a word to Escott went out of the room.

He went to the stable, where a groom, with his head under the flap, was tightening the girths of his horse's saddle. When the operation was finished and the groom's hand had been passed over the horse's quarters and down the legs—so that no fragment of straw or speck of dust should spoil his master's appearance—Dulverton “clombe to the saddle,” steered his horse out of the yard, and trotted off to shake all the cobwebs out of his mind in a rattling gallop.

It was after he had reached the long, green lane, where the tenderest-footed horse in the world may canter for three miles without a twinge of pain, that Dulverton turned his horse's head towards home, and walked it slowly towards the hamlet of Kyn. He looked at the church tower, at the red chimneys of the rectory, dimly discerned through the umbrageous trees, and began to think of Escott and Beatrice Haddon. He could not help envying the youth who now had the world at his feet, who had drawn back from the follies and vices of youth in time to win a pure woman's affection, and whose ambitions were now so high and true that his future could not but contribute to the great moral evolution of the race.

He was thinking of Escott's bright horizon, of his own sun that had sunk so suddenly into shadow, when he noticed Timothy Budge standing under the copper-beech outside the "Cripple's Ease," with the white stem of his churchwarden pipe held up as a signal for conversation.

"Well, Timothy," said Dulverton, coming to a standstill, and looking down with a smile at the jolly old red face of mine host. "Well, Timothy, what is it? How wags your world, friend, and how, in particular, is the worthy landlord of the 'Cripple's Ease'?"

"You'll pardon me stopping of you," murmured Timothy in a voice of great mystery, brushing aside as too trivial Sir Michael's courtesy; "but things has happened most peculiar—most peculiar!" He stood at the horse's shoulder, one hand stroking slowly and back-handedly the glossy coat, the other holding the stem of his churchwarden pipe near enough to his face to permit of an occasional scratch of the nose with its red wax tip.

"You must know, Sir Michael, I've had a gentleman stopping along of me," he continued, in the same husky whisper; "a gentleman what was werry friendly with the late countess, and often enough seen about these parts. Well, sir, yesterday morning, just before lunch, this Mr. Bolt he goes out, saying he'll be home to tea. He didn't come back to tea, Sir Michael. But soon after tea-time in comes the housekeeper from the castle, all through the thunder and lightning, and asks if he has re-

turned. 'Why,' says I, 'what do you want to know for, Mrs. Whittle?—meaning no disrespect.' 'The earl wants to know,' she said sharply. 'Well, then,' quoth I, 'he hasn't come back; you may tell his lordship that on my authority.' 'Will you arrange,' she says, 'to let me know immediately Mr. Bolt returns?' I hummed and hawed, as the saying is, and said I would see if it could be done without inconvenience. Lord, Sir Michael, you should have seen the old cat's face! Off she goes, but presently comes back again. 'I want your fly,' she said; 'I'm goin' to drive to the station.' 'You can have it, mum,' I says, 'though it's bad weather for horses, and coachmen too!' I tried to draw her while the horse was being put-to, and so did my missus, but she kept mum. All she would say was just that she had a most important message for Mr. Bolt, and that if he came back while she was out, why we was to beg him to remain till she returned."

Old Timothy paused, and for a change put the stem of his pipe into his mouth. He puffed at it with serious, down-drawn lips for a minute, and then continued: "But just before going, Sir Michael, she turned round to me, and says, 'I suppose you haven't seen her ladyship go by this afternoon?' 'Well, mum,' I answers, 'I've seen nothing all this blessed afternoon but lightning, and I don't suppose her ladyship was taking a promenade to look at that.' Fancy that, now! Her ladyship out in such a storm as we had yesterday!"

"Tell me the end of your story, Budge," said Sir Michael, listening intently.

"The end, Sir Michael, came this morning. My son William comes down here—he's walet to the earl—and he knocks me all of a heap on that there bench by saying, sudden-like, 'The countess is missing; she's run away!' Lord A'mighty, sir! it nearly killed me. Then he goes on to say as the earl was locked up in his room, growling and cursing, and wouldn't let no one come near him."

"You are sure of this story?" Dulverton demanded.

"Well, sir, my son William is a bit of a fool, true enough; but I don't remember him ever being much of a hand at lying. And then, you see, there was Mrs. Whittle a-galloping about in thunder and lightning all yesterday afternoon, and behaving of herself more like a water-rat than a two-legged baptized human being."

"And Mr. Bolt?" interrupted Dulverton. "Has he returned?"

"That's the whole point of the story," said Timothy, straightening himself up. "He aren't, sir; he aren't! That's the point."

"I must go to the castle," Dulverton said shortly. "In the meantime, Budge, keep this story quiet. It may be false. Keep it quiet."

He drew his horse into the road, trotted briskly to the castle gates, and once inside the drive got upon the turf under the trees and galloped, as hard as his horse could go, to the castle.

At the door the footman told him that Lord Mane would see no one. He asked for Mrs. Mersey. That good lady was not expected till the afternoon. He asked for Lord Kyn. His lordship was ill.

"Ill!" cried Dulverton; "seriously ill?"

"I think so, sir," the man answered. "His lordship has not come downstairs this morning."

"Has the doctor been sent for?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Whittle is nursing his lordship in her room."

"I must see her," cried Dulverton.

"She is out, sir."

"Then," said Dulverton, "I must see Lord Kyn. Ring for some one to take my horse."

In another minute Michael was following the footman upstairs to the housekeeper's room. His mind was filled with vague apprehension; something of a terrible nature had happened, and not the least serious aspect of the mystery to his mind was this sudden unattended illness of his poor little godson.

Thinking that the boy might be sleeping, he turned the handle of the door gently, but, to his horror, it was locked. He turned round, and faced the footman. "What on earth does this mean?" he asked. The man could not say; he was as much surprised as Sir Michael.

Dulverton rapped on the door, and called to the boy. "Are you here, Kyn?" he cried cheerfully, "It's I, Michael!"

A low, whimpering sound answered them.

"Can you hear me, dear child?" cried Dulverton. "I'm coming to see you, but the door's locked. Can you hear me?"

Again that low, whimpering sound, only nearer. The two men listened, and presently they saw the handle slightly turned, and heard the child whimpering. "Take me away!" he cried; "take me away! Oh, do take me away!"

"Stand back! dear child," shouted Dulverton; "I'm going to burst the door open. The key is lost. Stand well away, and don't be frightened."

He went to the other side of the corridor, sprang forward, and hurled himself sideways with terrific force against the door. It groaned, cracked, and shook, but the lock held. He went back again, the footman looking on with white face and staring eyes, and once again, with stern, set face, threw his great weight against the door. But the result was the same.

"Bring me an iron bar," he cried sharply; "anything will do. A bar of some kind—a bed-support, a window-bar; anything, only quick!"

The man hurried away, and Dulverton called again to the child, promising him instant succor. He talked cheerfully, promised him a long talk, and told of all the adventures he had to relate when the horrid door was broken. The only answer to all his encouragement was that same low whimper, and now and then the shuddering wail, "Oh, please take me away; I am so frightened."

In a few minutes the man was back with a stout iron bar, and Dulverton once more bade Kyn stand clear of the door, and not be frightened, for he was going to smash it down.

He lifted the bar and struck at the lock with all his strength; again, again, again. It seemed to yield, but still remained closed. Passing the bar to the man, Dulverton once more stepped to the farther side of the corridor, sprang fiercely forward, and dashed all his weight against the door. This time the weakened lock yielded; the door went inwards, and Dulverton was precipitated into the center of the room.

The sight that met his eyes melted all his heart to tears. Little Kyn, teaching the sheets, in Shakespeare's phrase, a whiter hue than white, sat huddled upon the bed, shaking like a man smitten with palsy, his teeth chattering, his eyes staring fearfully out of their sockets, his poor, ruffled, red hair adding to his expression of absolute terror.

Dulverton went quickly to his side, held him tightly and endearingly in his arms, and begged him to have no fear. He then despatched the servant for brandy, and wrapping Kyn in a quilt, walked to and fro in the room, soothing him, and kissing the white, cold face, the poor, blue lips—as tenderly as a mother.

"Has she gone?" the child gasped.

"Mrs. Whittle? Yes, you shall not stay with her any more."

The boy nestled closer to his side. "Oh, she was so cruel, so cruel!" he sobbed.

Dulverton soothed him. "Tell me why, dearest?" he asked gently.

"I wanted to save my mother. That bad man, Mr. Bolt—you know. He had stolen into her room, and Mrs. Whittle knew. I saw her talking to him. And she caught me, and carried me here. She frightened me. Oh, she made me so frightened. I promised I would not tell. She made me promise. But I must tell you, mustn't I?"

The man returned with the brandy. Dulverton coaxed the child into swallowing a teaspoonful, and then, wrapped in the quilt, bore him in his arms downstairs.

He asked the footman if Lord Mane was in his own little room at the end of the hall, and receiving an answer in the affirmative, went hurriedly forward in that direction.

He listened for a moment at the door, but nothing could be heard. Then he rapped gently. The voice of the earl, but high and weak, reached his ear: "Go to the devil, I tell you! Damme, how many more times? Go to the devil!"

Dulverton called through the door: "It is I, Lord Mane—Michael Dulverton. I must see you. Please open the door."

"Dulverton?" said the earl. "Why, you don't mean you're old Tom Dulverton of Slee-Marly?"

Sir Michael trembled. The earl was speaking of his father who had been dead for nearly fifteen years.

"No," he called back, "it is his son, Michael Dulverton."

"What! not little Michael? Come in, my boy, come in! Yes, I'll open to you, fast enough."

The key turned in the lock, the door opened, and there stood the earl before him—a decrepit, imbecile old man. His face was gray, his hair was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot. But the most appalling feature in his appearance was his mouth; for the lips were parted in a fixed, senile grin, a grin so meaningless that it produced a more confusing and chaotic effect upon the mind than would have been the case if the expression had been one of ferocity, however malignant. The under lip was moist with saliva, and hung down as if fixed there by the hand of a sculptor. The upper was drawn slightly back and disclosed the teeth.

The room was in a state of confusion. Although the morning sun streamed through the window and filled the little chamber with light, the oil-lamp still burned on the table—its flame, seen through the white globe, having the very pallor of death. Beside it on the table stood two bottles of whisky, both nearly empty, some glasses, a carafe of water, and a large syphon of mineral water. A broken tumbler lay on the floor, the powdered fragments glittering like diamonds on the red carpet. A gun was leaning against the mantelpiece; two of the pictures (prints of Morland's happy cottage-homes) had been taken from the wall and lay with shivered glass in the fender. Here a chair was cast upon its

side, there a drawer pulled from the writing-table stood gaping on the floor, its contents in a state of the wildest confusion. Letters were scattered about the floor, letters for the most part in writing easily recognizable by Dulverton—the handwriting of Helen Bladen. Books, too, were lying about the disordered chamber, and on the carpet in front of the fire tobacco ash was sprinkled in a gray trodden heap, mixed with the brown, damp cones knocked from exhausted pipes. The reek of the chamber was of the most revolting description.

When the earl caught sight of Dulverton he slowly brought a trembling hand to his forehead and held it there, thinking. Dulverton went straight to the window, seized the cord, and jerked open the fanlight at the top; then he went to the table and blew out the lamp.

“Dulv,” cried the earl in a weak, trembling voice, “I forgot, damme, I forgot all about you! I remember now. You’re Kyn’s godfather. But his mother’s played me false, Dulv. I’ve had to turn her away. You remember Helen Bladen? Damn her, she’s gone. I got rid of her last night. She and the man.”

He staggered back to his armchair, and sank into it, glancing stupidly at Dulverton.

“Lord Mane, you must rouse yourself,” cried Michael. “Don’t let your memory play tricks with you. Your wife is Hannah Mersey. You remember—*Hannah Mersey!*”

He emphasized the name, and the earl started.

"Yesterday somebody plotted to ruin her. Your child in my arms knows about it. He has suffered in the same villainy. Do you hear—somebody plotted to ruin your wife, your wife Hannah Mersey. You fell into the trap. She is innocent. Your wife is innocent. She is the victim of villainy."

Lord Mane listened eagerly, his brows contracted, his hand thrust forward. "Say that again," he said. "My wife is innocent. Hannah, little Kyn's governess, is the victim of villainy. Is that right, Dulv?"

Dulverton repeated it again.

"Why, I thought she'd broken my heart!" whimpered the earl. "I thought that I should have to live here alone, and die here alone, and that everythin' had gone. Dulv, I felt the earth go from under my feet. Everythin' seemed to go. An' it's all a mistake? Tell her to come to me."

"Where is she?" Dulverton asked.

The earl looked up. "Where is she?" he cried. "Why, isn't she here?—in the castle?"

"Have you no notion where she is?" Dulverton asked. "Think!"

The earl tapped his forehead with his fingers. "I remember something. Yes, I remember something, Dulv. She went away with that fellow Bolt; I remember it well."

"Where did you see her last?"

"It was at the door, when the storm was raging. Yes, I remember it very well. I drove her out into the night."

"Again and again did Dulverton strive to rouse the fettered senses of the earl to some degree of activity, but all his efforts were in vain. The old man, mumbling in his chair, tapping his forehead, grinning like one of Flaxman's dogs of the Inferno, could only remember that he had turned his wife away, with the man Bolt, and that a storm was raging.

While Dulverton was plying his question, and the broken old man was tapping his forehead, the door suddenly swung open, and Mrs. Whittle rushed into the room.

"Where is he?" she cried, striding threateningly towards the earl. "What have you done to him? Where have you hidden him?"

Her eyes flashed fire, and she raised her arm as if to strike the old man in the frenzy of her wrath. Then she saw Dulverton with Kyn in his arms, and started back for a moment. But only for a moment. The next instant she was bending her black passionate face over the cowering old man, repeating her question with a ferocity all the more terrifying for its half suppression.

"You shall tell me where he is before I leave your side," she said, between set teeth. "You know where he is, and where she is, too. Tell me where they are! Do you hear? Tell me where they are!"

Dulverton came forward, and touched her on the shoulder. "Who are you inquiring about?" he said sternly.

She looked up fiercely and answered: "What is that to you?"

"Be careful how you speak," he answered angrily.

She laughed, a brief, grating, mocking laugh, and turned once more to the earl. "Rouse yourself and answer me, you drunken old man. Where have you sent him? Where has he gone?"

Dulverton came between her and the earl. "You forget yourself," he said quietly. "If you do not speak respectfully I shall turn you out of this room."

She looked at him with black hatred in her eyes. "You! You turn me out! With her child in your arms! Bah! are my claims to be weighed with yours?"

Before she could resume her attack on Lord Mane, Dulverton forced her back. "My object is the same as yours," he said sternly; "but if you do not control yourself I shall ring this bell and order the footman to take you out of the room."

She held her peace, and looked at him narrowly to see if he meant what he said.

"You want to discover where your accomplice, Mr. Oliver Bolt, is to be found," said Dulverton. "I want to discover where the Countess of Mane is. Our object is the same, then. Now, keep silence till I bid you speak."

He spoke with the stern, ringing tones of one whose due is instant and implicit obedience, and the woman cowered before him. Then he turned to the earl. But to all his questions the stricken old

man, tapping his forehead and knitting his brows, could only answer that he had seen them go, those two, out into the storm, and that he had shut the door on them.

At last, having learned from Mrs. Whittle that neither Oliver Bolt nor the countess had been seen at the railway station, Dulverton determined to organize a search through the cottages on the estate. He could not doubt that they had left the castle, and the earl's positive and reiterated statement concerning the storm and the shutting of the door confirmed him in the theory. But why had they not returned? Was the boy's story only an imagination, and was Hannah, after all, guilty of the earl's charge?

Dulverton sent the housekeeper forth to inquire at certain cottages in the park whether Mr. Bolt had been seen that night, and then closing the door he turned all his attention to Kyn.

"Now I want you to tell me everything about yesterday," he said. "See if you can remember everything that happened, like a very clever boy."

The child's eyes brightened. "I saw Mr. Bolt in the wood with Mrs. Whittle before yesterday, but yesterday I went there to look again, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, godpapa, I saw Mr. Bolt walking to the castle, and it was lunch-time, and no one was there to stop him. And when I got in my papa was angry because I was so late, and he sent me to have my lunch in Mrs. Whittle's room——"

The earl interrupted. "You remember we made

it up, Kyn! Don't you remember, we made it up, an' she saw us on the stairs, an' then I took you round Kyn's Way?"

"No, you didn't, papa; you were going to, but Mrs. Whittle came and whispered something, and then she made me go downstairs, and you ran away from me. And then I heard you beating on mamma's door, and I heard you shouting, and I thought Mr. Bolt was killing her, so I ran upstairs; but Mrs. Whittle"—he shuddered—"caught me, and put her hand on my mouth, and carried me to her room. And I cried there, and screamed to you and mamma, and she beat me and said she'd kill me. And so I didn't go to Kyn's Way after all, did I?"

The earl tapped his forehead. "I remember openin' both doors, Kyn; an' I remember seein' the lightning' jumpin' about inside. Don't you remember that, too?"

The boy shook his head. "Perhaps," he said, looking at Dulverton, "perhaps Mr. Bolt has shut my mother in Kyn's Way."

Dulverton started. "By George, Kyn!" he cried, "you may have hit it!" He went over to the earl's chair. "Don't let memory beat you, Lord Mane; try once more. Did you lock Lady Mane in this Kyn's Way?"

The earl fumbled in his pocket and drew forth his gold toothpick. Then his trembling fingers returned to the pocket, and he pulled out the key of Kyn's Way. The grin died from his mouth. His

brows became knotted ; he pursed his lips ; he beat the ash-sprinkled carpet with his foot.

"There's the key," he said softly. "The only one in the world. When I die it'll belong to Kyn. Now who was it went there with me yesterday?" He paused for a long time, and Dulverton encouraged him gently to think again.

"Let us go and look for mamma," pleaded the child. "I know the way to the door, but you must bring a candle, godpapa, because it's most dreadfully dark—oh, much darker than the night."

"Brave words, Kyn!" said Dulverton, and, taking the key from the willing hand of Lord Mane, he left the room.

But the child was too ill for such an enterprise, and therefore, when Dulverton had been shown where the door of Kyn's Way was situated, he gave the boy over to the charge of a footman, and, armed with a candle, returned once more to the mysterious door.

The key turned easily in the lock ; at the second tug the heavy safe-like door pulled open ; and Dulverton stood before the other keyless door. He was not long in discovering the large central bolt, and pushing this back, he found that the door opened inwards easily enough. He stood in the small circle chamber lighted by the narrow loophole high up in the walls.

Not a sound was to be heard, and Dulverton feared that Kyn's idea was vain after all. Not a

sound of any kind; not a sign on floor or wall of human being having been there for centuries.

Dulverton lighted the candle and went slowly down the tunnel, listening with eager intentness for the slightest sound. He reached the dead wall, the seven stone steps, the second circular chamber. Not a sound, not a sign. He continued his journey with sinking heart.

Half-way down this next tunnel, however, he heard a light cry. He stopped and held the candle high above his head, peering into the darkness. Then he saw Lady Mane approaching him—white as death, with her dark eyes staring at him as if she walked in her sleep. He waited, and she approached.

“You!” she whispered.

“There’s been some terrible mistake,” he said, in a kind, soothing tone.

“Yes!” she repeated, still looking at him with that glazed expression in her large luminous dark eyes.

“I have come to take you out of this place,” he answered. “There was no one else to do it. Lord Mane is ill.”

“You—you have saved me!” she said wonderingly. Then she drew in her breath with a little cry, fell forward, and flung her arms onto his shoulders, resting her head upon his bosom. It was the fulfilment of her dream to find herself in his embrace, with those strong arms supporting her. All thoughts of her terrible imprisonment, all thoughts

of her rescue, vanished, died away, in the lotus-like peace which now flooded her mind. She was near the man she loved; resting on his breast; his arms about her waist; her face moved with the rise and fall of his bosom. She clung there, sighing deliciously, thinking of nothing.

And then it seemed to her that the arm about her waist tightened, that she was drawn gently nearer to his embrace, that warm breath stirred the tresses of her hair. She shut her eyes, wondering if he was kissing her hair. O dream, too beautiful, too fond! This man whom she had wronged, whose life was wrecked by her silence, whose sun could shine again at one word from her—this man, this strong and kingly knight, to fold her nearer to his breast, to kiss her hair! God, how he must hate her!

She struggled away, and looked breathlessly into his eyes, her cheeks flaming, her lips still parted in the bliss of her dream. He approached her, and she saw that his eyes were shining too—shining as she had never seen them shine before, and that his face was deadly white.

“You must let me take you away,” he said, and his voice trembled.

“Yes,” she answered, “you must take me away.”

“Will you let me support you? You are very weak.” He held the candle in his left hand, and passed his right arm round her waist. She felt the iron strength of that support, and sighed.

There was a slight move behind them, and both turned to look round. Oliver Bolt stood there.

"Not the first Lady Mane who has been in your arms?" he said to Dulverton, trying to laugh scornfully.

"Not the first Lady Mane you have tried to ruin, sir," Dulverton answered, with a menacing look.

"Take me away," she whispered. "I fear him."

"Have no fear," Dulverton answered, and his arm imparted something of his strength to her mind.

"I am not prepared to deny responsibility in the second case," Bolt answered; "but in the first case I was a mere witness—not the co-respondent. An infinitely more eminent and respectable person played the leading rôle in that pretty drawing-room comedy." He tried to speak light-heartedly, but the imprisonment had told on his nerves.

Dulverton's voice was low and even when he replied to this brutal innuendo. "I wish to hold no conversation with you," he said, "but it may spare this lady's feelings if I tell you that your villainy has been discovered." Then he went forward with Hannah at his side.

"Ah, I'm glad you are making a move!" Bolt said, with an affectation of indifference to Dulverton's warning. "When one has been living like a rat in a tunnel for some considerable time, one's appetite is apt to be one's first consideration. The cook at the castle, however, is not an artist."

Dulverton, who longed to turn upon Bolt and inflict some chastisement upon him as would silence

his bragging, kept perfect control of his nerves, and led the almost fainting Hannah out of the tunnel.

Once in the corridor she revived. "I should like to see Lord Mane at once!" she said courageously. "Then—my child!"

"I will ask you to follow us," Dulverton said, turning to Bolt.

That gentleman bowed with a kind smile. "You are on speaking terms, then, with the earl," he said pleasantly. "Come, there is hope for me."

XXVIII

THE PRODIGAL SON

LORD MANE, all white and disheveled, sat in his armchair, a foot beating the floor littered with tobacco ash, a hand extended before him holding in the palm his gold toothpick. His lips were compressed, his brows were knotted. Now and then he muttered to himself. Now and then he shifted in his chair; but ever his head was bent down, ever his eyes fixed upon the toothpick. "I have seen it before," he said. "Let me think. I saw it yesterday. I opened the door with it; the door to Kyn's Way. Hannah was there, and the lightnin' was there. Did I hear thunder? Umph, that's the point. I remember that Hannah stole somethin'. She took somethin' I wanted to keep. She struck me. Yes, I'm sure she struck me. I can feel the pain now; there's a scar somewhere. But Dulv says she's innocent. That's the point. It's very confusin'. We must ask Whittle."

The door opened. Hannah entered, followed by Sir Michael and Oliver Bolt. He looked up, fixed his eyes upon hers for a minute, then lowered them and began to cry, whimpering like a child.

She went to him and held out her hand, stooping with gentle tenderness over his cowering figure.

He caught her hand between his, drew it swiftly to his breast, and held it there—stroking it, caressing it, pressing it ever nearer.

“I have come back to you,” she said gently.

“Yes, yes,” he answered.

“And there is nothing to forget or forgive.

“Ah, that is good. But we must ask Whittle. Whittle will tell us. I think I made a mistake. But I am glad you’ve come back. We won’t ask Whittle. It doesn’t matter now that you’ve found your way home. If you’ve stolen anythin’ you’ll give it back. I think you’ve put it back already. My heart doesn’t seem so empty. Yes, we won’t ask Whittle. Whittle must be kept away. She must go to the devil, she must, really.”

Dulverton placed a chair for Hannah beside the earl, and then gently touched the old man’s shoulder. “There is some business to be gone through, Lord Mane,” he said. “We must do it at once. Lady Mane is not well, and this matter must be cleared up immediately, so that she may be released.”

Hannah bent nearer to her husband. “Shall Sir Michael manage for you, dear?” she whispered.

“No, no,” he said; “that won’t do. Most irregular. I must be master in my own house. No one shall rule me.” He roused himself, raised his head from his breast, and looked at Dulverton. “What’s the business, Dulv? Tell me what it is!”

“In the first place,” Michael replied, “you want to

know what excuse Mr. Bolt means to urge for being in your house?"

The earl fixed his eyes on Oliver. They blinked fiercely, and his mouth began to work with rage. Hannah leaned back in her chair, very white and very weary. She looked often at Dulverton.

"My excuse," said Bolt, "involves Lady Mane's honor. Is it wise that I should give it?"

"That is a lie," Dulverton said very quietly.

The earl bent forward, his eyes flashing angrily. "Involves Lady Mane's honor! How dare you say that? Dulverton, what does he mean? He was the man who ruined my last wife. It wasn't you; ask Criddle, he'll tell you."

Hannah laid a restraining hand on the earl's arm. "I went to my room yesterday," she said, with a weary, tired sigh, "and this man was there—hiding like a thief. Then you came to the room."

Lord Mane interrupted. "Whittle told me to. Where's Whittle? I must consult Whittle. There's no movin' till we get hold of Whittle."

"In the meantime," said Bolt, who was leaning lazily against the wall, "perhaps you, Lady Mane, will be good enough to give me yesterday's dinner. Fasting does not agree with my constitution. Remember—forgive me for reminding you—I am still Lady Mane's guest."

"You shall eat nothing in this house," Hannah answered, "unless your accomplice gives it to you out of pity."

"His accomplice!" cried the earl. "Are there two

of 'em! This is most confusin'. Everythin's goin' round an' round. We must have Whittle here. Dulverton, please tell Whittle to come in an' discuss the matter."

"One moment," Michael answered, and he strode over to Bolt. He stood there before the lounging Oliver—tall, and straight as a lance, his face stern and contemptuous, his hands clenched at his side. "Let me warn you, Mr. Bolt," he said, in a low voice that trembled with passion, "let me warn you that your villainy is known. Every lie that you utter now will make your fate harder. Every lie that you utter which touches the honor of Lady Mane shall cost you a horsewhipping at my hands. Take care—I warn you."

Hannah looked up with a sudden light in her eyes. Had she heard his words aright? This man her deliverer, this man her knight! And had he not reproached her with his ruin and the ruin of the woman she supplanted? "*Lady Mane is innocent. I am innocent.*" O chivalry greater than she could understand! O magnanimity nobler than she could endure!

She rose from her chair and went towards Dulverton; but at that moment the door opened suddenly and Mrs. Whittle entered breathless and white.

The housekeeper came into the room dressed in bonnet and cloak, fresh from her visit to the cottages. "You have found him!" she cried, as she opened the door. But as it closed, her old calm re-

turned, and after resting her eyes on Bolt for one fleeting instant she confronted the group, boldly, shamelessly, almost sternly.

"Lord Mane has been waiting for you, Mrs. Whittle," Bolt said. "His lordship has declared, with a reiteration a little tiring when one is positively consumed with hunger, that he can do nothing without you. 'We must have Whittle' has been the burden of his song."

But at the appearance of the housekeeper the old man had cowered back into his chair. His eyes were bent down, the fierce firmness left his lips. One hand moved restlessly at his side, as if it sought for something. Dulverton whispered a word in Hannah's ear. She went back to her place beside the earl and took his hand in hers.

"You want me, my lord?" said the housekeeper.

"Not now, Whittle, not now. Another time."

Hannah bent over the earl. "We must ask Mrs. Whittle to explain, dear, how it was——"

"On no account, on no account," interrupted Lord Mane. "Let there be no explanations. Everythin' is to go on as before."

"But, I must insist——" Hannah began.

"No, no; don't insist," the poor old man cried piteously; "I beg of you, I pray of you, don't insist. There is no need for it."

Mrs. Whittle approached nearer. "What does her ladyship insist upon?"

Hannah was weak and weary. She was deadly white; black rings loomed under her eyes through

the whiteness of her flesh like heavy bruises. She scarcely had the muscular strength to keep her eyes fixed upon the threatening gaze of the housekeeper. But she roused herself.

"I insist upon knowing why you asked your friend Mr. Bolt to the castle?" she said.

"Is there any need for such an explanation?" Bolt laughed. "Lord Mane has been gracious enough to ask for no explanation of my presence in your ladyship's room."

Dulverton faced him. "I have warned you!" he cried.

"You have threatened me," Bolt answered. "I have made a note of it for my lawyers' amusement."

"Threatened you!" said Mrs. Whittle, turning to Dulverton with angry effrontery. "How dare you threaten him? What do you threaten him with?"

"Whittle, Whittle!" whispered the earl. "You must not raise your voice. I really can't have it. You must be quiet and respectful. All is forgotten an' forgiven. Everythin', everythin'. I can't say more than that. Now do go, an' leave me in peace."

"I agree with Lord Mane," said Bolt, standing clear of the wall; "it is time to end this very painful domestic scene. All is forgotten and forgiven, and I am hungry."

"Before you go," Dulverton answered, "there is an explanation due to Lady Mane."

Bolt raised his eyebrows and smiled. "An explanation due to Lady Mane?" He laughed softly. "Pray tell me from whom? From Lord Mane?"

"From you," said Dulverton, "and from Mrs. Whittle."

Hannah, whose thoughts were of Dulverton, whose eyes seldom roved from watching his commanding face, roused herself, and looked at Mrs. Whittle. "I insist on that explanation," she said.

The housekeeper turned to the earl. "Do you hear that?" she demanded scornfully. "Your wife, who was found by you yesterday with Mr. Bolt locked in her room, demands an explanation from me?"

"Nothin' to do with me," said the earl. "Her ladyship manages everythin'. You must deal with her, Whittle. It's no use appealin' to me."

"Oh, isn't it?" said the housekeeper fiercely. "Am I to take my orders, then, from this upstart, this governess who plotted and schemed to marry you while your wife was still in the castle?"

Hannah turned very pale. "I dismiss you from my service," she said. "Your wages will be paid. Go!" She shuddered, and seemed as if she were about to swoon.

Mrs. Whittle's eyes flashed. "You dismiss me!" she said between her teeth. "You dismiss me! I refuse to take dismissal from your mouth. Let the earl speak."

Dulverton interposed. "And your accomplice will be given into the hands of the police," he said threateningly. "I have evidence against you both."

The look which flashed from the housekeeper's dark face as she wheeled round and faced Dulverton

was of the most terrible description. Anger shone there, then fear, then terror, then effrontery, then absolute humility. It was all there in a second of time, one expression merging into the other like the colors of a rainbow.

"What do you mean?" she hissed.

"I have got evidence to prove your complicity with this man in a serious crime. I mean that he will be arrested," Dulverton answered.

She turned to the earl. "Hear him!" she cried, white and breathless. "He is going to give your son into the hands of the police!"

The earl sprang from his chair, Hannah rose on the same instant, Dulverton followed their gaze. They all looked fixedly at Oliver Bolt.

"My son!" cried the earl. "Who is my son?"

The housekeeper pointed to Bolt.

"Most embarrassing," laughed Oliver. "Really, to meet one's father after all these years, and in a scene of this description—most embarrassing! For father and son; for both of us, my lord—most embarrassing."

The earl stood gazing at him, Hannah at his side. "You—my son!" he whispered. "You—my son!" Then he slowly removed his gaze, and looked at the housekeeper. "Is this truth?"

Dulverton, whose heart went out to Hannah in this distressing scene, looked at her. Her eyes were fixed dreamily upon his.

"Yes, it is true," said the housekeeper fiercely. "For him I have toiled all these years, for him I

have lived and worked and thought. I gave him a good education. I made him a gentleman. And now—now he is to go to prison! Is he, is he?"

The earl whined, and sank back into his chair. "I can't think things out," he complained querulously. "Everythin' 's happenin' all at once. I don't know what all this trouble is about."

"Let me tell you," said Dulverton in a strong, vigorous voice. "This woman here plotted with her own son to ruin the honor of Lady Mane. Her object evidently was to remove all obstacles from her path in obtaining control over your will. Her son has expensive tastes; he is already deeply in debt; he dare not show his face in certain quarters of London."

"What if it is true?" said the housekeeper. "Is the child's father going to drive me out of his house; is he going to send his own son to prison? But it's not true. Tell me your evidence. What do you mean by trying to frighten me? There's no evidence—none at all."

"He's my son, Dulv," cried the poor, broken old man; "he's my son, an' Whittle's been a good servant."

"Ah!" cried the housekeeper. "That's the word of my employer. I take my orders from him—from no one else."

At this point, just when Dulverton was at his wits' end how to proceed, when the earl was yielding every moment to the housekeeper, when Hannah, sick and weary, was closing her eyes in half

swoon, half sleep—at this point the door opened with a good, vigorous swing, and Mrs. Mersey bustled into the room like a very self-important turkey-cock.

“Goodness gracious!” she exclaimed, looking at Mrs. Whittle; “is this woman still in the house?” She turned to Hannah and the earl. “Have you heard what she’s done, have you heard all her wickedness? And none of you with that poor child——”

“My child!” cried Hannah, springing forward, her eyes blazing, her cheeks blanched.

“That poor little Lord Kyn,” said Mrs. Mersey. “He saved you; he told Sir Michael where you were hidden, and how this wicked woman had plotted with that scoundrel there. Oh, I know which is Sir Michael and which the scoundrel, though I’ve never seen either before. Yes, and he’s just told me how she nearly murdered him, and if he does die, as die he very likely may—poor blessed darling—you, you wicked woman, shall hang as sure as there’s a judge on the bench and a rope on the earth.”

“Kyn saved me?” cried Hannah, staggering back.

“But for him you’d have been buried alive,” rejoined the brisk Mrs. Mersey, “and buried alive with a stigma resting on your name which would have eaten into the earl’s heart and poisoned his happiness till the Day of Judgment.”

“Kyn—Kyn saved me!” Hannah repeated, like one dreaming. The thought staggered her under-

standing. Her love for Dulverton, renewed by his presence there and by his devotion to her cause, was incontinently cast on one side by this giant intelligence that the child she was murdering had saved her life and honor. She pressed her hands to her eyes, and staggered slowly backwards. Dulverton went to her side and supported her. She could only gasp, "Kyn saved me." Then she collected all her faculties, straightened herself to her full height, and walked steadily to the door. "I must go to him," she said, and went out of the room.

"And now, my lord," said Mrs. Mersey, "you must shake yourself together and listen to me."

"Yes—yes," he said, with a grateful smile; "I'm always willin' to do as you tell me. I'm master of my own house, and you never advise anything that is wrong. I'll listen to you. Certainly, certainly."

"Turn that woman out of the castle this instant," said the inflexible matron.

"Do you know who I am?" cried the housekeeper.

"I can guess," Mrs. Mersey answered; "but I should hope you'd have the common decency not to mention it in the hearing of honest folks."

"That gentleman," said the housekeeper, pointing to Oliver, "is the son of Lord Mane."

Mrs. Mersey never flinched. "You bold-faced thing!" she cried promptly. "Take yourself out of the room, with the evidence of your sin. It's an insult to see you here; it's lowering to hear you talk."

Oliver Bolt came forward. He touched Mrs. Whittle on the arm. "Let us go," he said; "the scene grows tiresome; my hunger increases."

"Tell them," said Mrs. Mersey to the earl, "tell them to go instantly. Don't suffer their presence here another minute. Give the woman the name of your solicitor; let the lawyers pay her wages. And if anything happens to that sweet angel of a child, the lawyers will know where to find his murderess."

Oliver Bolt whispered something to Mrs. Whittle, and they withdrew to the door. But there the woman turned round. "What you say is a lie," she said. "I never harmed the child. He is half-witted; he doesn't know what he says. See if his evidence will be taken by a judge! I'll go out of this house, but I'll have justice for my son."

Oliver held the door open, and gently constrained his mother to leave the room. Then he turned and made a bow to the earl. "Good-by, my dear, naughty papa!" he said, laughing scornfully.

"The beast!" said Mrs. Mersey as the door shut. "And now I must go to that poor child."

XXIX

THE CURTAIN FALLS

AT the bedside of stricken Kyn the curtain descended on Hannah's stage. The stroke of God, which strikes away from us all the parasitical interests of life, leaving the soul naked under the stars, solitary there between the eternal past and the eternal future, had been at last and finally struck for her. Every delusion fell away from her; every trick and falsity of life. Her eyes were opened, and she knew that she was naked—naked under the eternal stars; a soul newly awakened on a single point in the boundless infinitude of space. All the rest was like a dream; her life in the years behind seemed to be but part of an intangible phantasmagoria, an unreality—the mocking unreality of an actress's crown and purple. Now only was she alive; now only for her was life a real and subjective existence. All the rest had been false—the acting of a part. And she was naked. No preparations had been made to usher her soul from the narrow confines of life's painted stage into this illimitable universe, lit only by those silent stars, whose calm atmosphere undulated only to the beating of angel wings. She was there alone, uncomprehending, terrified. The vastness of space chilled her poor

naked soul; the everness of God crushed and numbed her understanding. She was like Belshazzar when, as he sat drinking wine in the midst of his princes, his wives, and his concubines, there came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace. Or, like any human being living without God in his life, to whom the physician suddenly comes and numbers the tale of his days. The riddle of the universe presses then for answer; it burns itself into the brain; it haunts the sleepless watches of the night; it beats ceaselessly at the doors of the soul, "Answer me, answer me!" And he who has no answer must lie there speechless in the aching silence of his own soul, listening, with beaded brow and starting eyes, for the first faint footfall of Death.

During the long hours that Hannah had been immured in the walls of Kyn Castle she had thought of death, had even implored consolation from her fellow-prisoner. And his only answer to all her supplication had been to heap high the furnace of a material hell, adding with the coarseness of modern realism new tortures to the figurative pains of the Christian's Gehenna. He had done this to taunt and mock her, taking a savage pleasure in the breathless interest with which she listened to his words. And she—who, under the blue sky with the wind stirring the ivy, and the air full of birds' songs, would have laughed such a hell to scorn—in that grim prison, that vast and wandering grave,

had listened and believed it true. She had cowered and trembled there on the edge of Hades, peering with stricken eyes into the leaping flames, listening with burning ears to the long-drawn wail of the eternal-lost. And why should it not be true? Like her, they had sinned willingly; like her, the object of all their cunning and their lust had been the trivial advantaging of themselves. O sin, black sin, to cause another a moment's pain in cause so vile and contemptible! Yes; no punishment could be too cruel, no destiny too mean!

Thus she had thought in her living grave. But with freedom came release from hell, and she took new hope. It was only when she realized that the child she had doomed to death had been the means of saving her from her terrible fate, that Hannah felt the earth slide away from her like a garment, and stood face to face, not with hell, but with God. This intelligence that Kyn had saved her lit up her mind with the sudden radiance of a lightning flash, and it was in that moment, on that very instant, that she realized for the first time the enormity of her crime, the utter and irremediable degradation of her soul.

From that time Hannah devoted her life to the earl's heir. She showed to him an infinite tenderness, bestowed on him a never-wavering service; in place of the tigerish love she had felt for the child of her womb, there grew up for this other child a love at once beautiful and beneficent. He loved to have her at his bedside, loved to feel her hand

passed soothingly across his brow, loved to hear her voice, loved to watch her busying herself about the room in his behalf. She had his bed brought into her room, and his lightest cry at night was enough to call her instantly from sleep to bend over him with the gentlest, the sweetest solicitude. Everything that could be done to make his confinement endurable she did. Everything that brought sweetness and happiness into the room was her invention, her labor.

And night by night, morning by morning, ay, and many a time through the long waking day, she would pray that his life might be spared, that the consequences of her sin might be put away from her. And the days passed, and slowly, very slowly, Kyn's strength returned, the torpor left him, till the answer to her prayer seemed to grow under her very eyes. Happy, happy was her heart, when she saw the light come back into his eyes, the color of life steal gradually into those death-white cheeks. She flung herself upon her knees, blessed heaven for its bounty, and prayed with the eagerness of a soul new-enfranchised from the slavery of the world, for a heart to fear and love God all the days of her life.

The swelling octave of her life's sonnet had broken and spent itself; she was now gliding dreamfully on the peaceful ebb of the sestet.

XXX

"THE SHOT WHICH BRINGS HER DOWN"

IT was the habit of Mr. Haddon to rivet the attention of his congregation by the curtness of his text. On one occasion, I remember,—if the reader will forgive me for a moment's rummaging among the good parson's musty manuscripts—he preached a sermon on the single word "If"—a sermon of thirty closely written pages.

"My text," he began, "is the first word of the ninth verse of the first chapter of the first Epistle General of St. John. That sounds a great deal, my brethren, but my text is one word, a word of two letters—If!" After that, who cannot see every drowsy eye wide-opened and turned towards the pulpit? Even the evangelical Criddle pricked his ears.

On the occasion to which we now refer, for the purpose of our narrative, Mr. Haddon had chosen the words "God knows." The reader must bear with the author while he tries to summarize that part of the sermon which effected an influence in our story. But ere he enters on that delicate task, let it be recorded that Sir Michael Dulverton was in church, Lord Escott and Miss Haddon in the rectory pew, and alone in the solitude of the earl's

pew (for Mrs. Mersey could not put up with Mr. Haddon's ritualistic wickedness) Hannah—Hannah, a thousand times more beautiful, a thousand times more pathetic, a thousand times more dignified, now that she had laid by her masque and was living with her own face to the world, her soul alive to the influences of the invisible kingdom of spirits.

Mr. Haddon's rosy face rivaling his scarlet brow, his shining, carefully parted, black hair, his large humorous eyes, his prominent Fielding chin, these suggested nothing of the Loyola or Savonarola, nothing of the burning prophet whose breast throbbed against the iniquity of an evil and perverse generation. He looked a very smooth and comfortable gentleman, one who liked a country living, and who detested noise and hurry perhaps more than some of the more serious evils of life. Whether he was sincere or not in the denunciations which fluttered his congregation from Sunday to Sunday, who can say? Perhaps for him the curtain was still up, the lights burning before him, and his part but half played out. It is not for us to determine.

"God knows!" he cried, looking from side to side. "That's a phrase everyone has heard. We ask a man who did this, or who said that. He answers, 'God knows.' It is said contemptuously, blasphemously. It means—nobody knows. But God does know. Yes, He knows everything. He knows more of the wife than the husband knows; more of the husband than the wife knows. He knows the heart; He knows the secret sins, the secret thoughts. How

many people are there, honored members of society, received at every fireside with open arms, who pass among men as honorable, upright, pure, and unselfish—who are known to God as liars and adulterers, sinners almost beyond the reach of redemption?"

He paused and leaned over the pulpit. "How many of you here," he said slowly, "have secret sins? How many of you live two lives? How many of you steal away from your homes to commit in secret the sin none of us knows of? God knows! God knows those sins. He reads your secret thoughts; He sees your secret actions. God knows that your works are evil; and it is the Eternal God, the Dispenser of eternal justice, you defy; your own powerless fellow-sinners whom you fear and conciliate with hypocrisy."

The rest of his sermon followed on these lines, and Mr. Haddon banged the ledge of the pulpit, craned over his desk, and became more and more excited, as he saw face after face growing scarlet, head after head being bowed, the whole congregation shifting in their seats like boats riding at anchor on a rippling sea.

Hannah was not one of those who bowed her head and shrank from the preacher's gaze, but to no one in the little village church on that autumn Sunday did the words strike home with so deep a meaning. It suggested a new thought; presented before her mind a new problem.

Was sin—however sincerely repented—forgiven,

and its consequences effaced, without confession? Was it necessary to her salvation that she put Michael Dulverton right before the world, abdicate her own false position as the wife of Lord Mane? She shuddered at the thought. Yet forgiveness was not what she sought alone. She longed for the peace which passeth all understanding; and now that the prayer uttered long ago under the roof of old Gregory Brough had been answered, now that she desired Goodness, loved it beyond all else in life, she dared not live in a false peace, dared not trifle with her repentance.

She walked home turning this thought over in her mind. At lunch—answering Mrs. Mersey's cheerful questions with a smile, tending the old, tremulous earl like a mother, encouraging little Kyn to talk to her—she was speaking with herself in secret, asking her soul: "Must I confess my sin before the world?"

In the afternoon, as she sat on one of the terraces by Lord Mane's bath-chair, talking to the shattered old man of the harvest and of the sick people in the village—rocking, in the beautiful phrase, the cradle of declining age—she was holding the same converse with her soul. At night, lying on her sleepless pillow, she prayed that God would send an angel out of heaven to guide her feet aright, to make this dark mystery plain.

On the following afternoon, as was her wont, she went to sit with Lady Dulverton, now fast failing, now one of her dearest friends. The old lady sat

indoors by an open window, a shawl of the whitest wool over her shoulders, her poor, thin, wrinkled hands lying weakly in her lap.

"You are feeling better to-day?" Hannah asked, when she had kissed the old lady's cheek.

She smiled sadly and slightly nodded her head. "I do not wish to feel better, my dear," she said very quietly. "It is too late now. He will never retrieve the past. I have nothing to live for."

"But you know he is innocent," Hannah answered, her heart beating nervously.

"I know, too, that he is unhappy," she answered, in the same sad, far-away tones.

"Ah! he is unhappy?"

The old lady sighed. "His efforts to regain the old influence have failed. A man who lives with a broken ambition can never be happy."

"He regrets the loss of his ambition?"

"His life is now only regret. It cannot be anything else."

Hannah looked through the open window across the smooth green lawns to the calm lake with the unstirred silver birches beyond. "Is he not happy with you in the peace of this home?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"A dead peace! A dead peace!" sighed the old lady. Then she weakly lifted her bowed head, smiled through the tears in her eyes, and patted Hannah's hands. "But we must not be miserable. It is very good of you to come and sit with me. Tell

me about little Valentine. He is growing a fine boy?"

And Hannah talked to the old lady till the heat of the afternoon fell panting into the calm of even-tide, and a great hush fell upon the land.

She was walking home in this exquisite autumn calm, her soul more greatly troubled than before, when she encountered Michael Dulverton. He thanked her, as he had often thanked her, for sitting with his well-beloved mother, and then it seemed to her that he was about to leave her and return to his home.

"Will you walk with me across the park?" she said quietly. "I have something I must ask you."

He was surprised by the request, for since their meeting in Kyn's Way she had always seemed to shun him.

They walked over the wide, undulating park, side by side, now passing under the wide-spreading branches of oak and elm, now coming into spacious, uninterrupted stretches of greensward. The noise of laborers amid the golden sheaves came to them on the still air from the distant upland. The song of birds floated above them; from the elms about the homestead came the softened cawing of the rookery.

"You were in church yesterday," she said; "you heard Mr. Haddon's sermon. I want to ask you a question about it."

"I am no doctor of divinity," he answered, smiling.

"I am very much in earnest," she said quietly.

"Forgive me," he muttered quickly.

"Tell me," she said, "is a secret sin, a sin repented of, and long since hated, forgiven without confession?"

"John Selden declares," he said, after a pause, "that the difference between us and the Papists is that while we both insist on the necessity for contrition, the Papists—the word is Selden's—make confession a part of contrition. Rome holds that a man is not sufficiently contrite till he has confessed his sins to a priest. That is Selden's view—'the chief of learned men,' as Milton called him. I know him almost by heart, and the quotation is, I think, quite correct."

"But your view?"

"For myself, I hate the idea of mortal interposition between a man and his Creator. I am a Protestant of the Protestants, solely on that score."

"There need be no confession, then?"

"One knows oneself when one is sincerely repentant," he answered. "The forgiveness of sins is the prerogative of God; no man can secure that for another."

"But ought there not to be confession to those we have wronged?"

"It is difficult to answer that question," he answered thoughtfully.

They were walking very slowly across the uneven ground of the park, and at this point Hannah laid her hand lightly upon his arm. She could bear no longer the intolerable weight of her overloaded con-

science. This man who had placed in her hands on the morning of her triumph a rebuke that had never been forgotten even in the full flood of her glory—this man who had been so generous and chivalrous in her behalf, though he must have hated and despised her—this man must not go on living in the belief that she was still insincere, still that hideous being at whose past even now she stood aghast. She laid her hand upon his arm, and they stopped, facing each other.

"In my own case?" she asked.

"I do not understand."

"Try and make it easy for me!" she pleaded, meeting the steady gaze of his grave eyes. "You know how I have sinned. You know how I have kept silence."

A light shone in his eyes; he drew his breath in quickly. "And you would confess it now?" he said. "Oh, no; let him live in peace. But why did you not wait? Why, why were you carried so swiftly away? Nothing could repay what the gratification of a moment's ambition must inevitably exact. Did you not realize that at the moment?"

She looked at him bewildered. "I mean," she said, "my sin against you."

"I know!" he cried. "God! have I not lived with it all these many days!" He came nearer, and looked down into her eyes with a great yearning. "Knowing what you knew you sinned against me; at first—oh, for long days—I thought you did not know. I thought it was the creation of my own

thought, and I fought against it in secret, and returned to public life that I might forget it. You knew it, you knew it, and yet you took that step!"

"I knew it," she said. "I was mad. I was not my real self. I think my soul must have been sleeping."

"You knew it," he said again, very pale, his eyes dull with pain.

"From the first I knew it," she said.

"Oh, Hannah!" he cried, in a voice almost a wail, "why did you break my heart?"

She shrank back, gazing like a hunted creature into his eyes. "What do you mean?" she said quickly; "what do you mean?"

"If from the first you loved me, if from the first you knew I loved you——"

She swayed, and stretched out her arms. He caught her hands and held them.

The silence of night closed round about them. No song of bird broke the perfect all-dwelling stillness of the autumn twilight. The last wagon had borne its golden load through the green lanes, and now the last rays of the sun lingered with a regretful glory on the few sheaves still standing on the deserted upland. It was eventide, such an evening as only autumn can give to the earth—calm, peaceful, full of a golden reflection.

"I sent you a note on the very morning of that miserable day. My first thought was of you. I had seen you that evening in the castle, I had watched you moving among those people like an

angel of purity among the lost, and the love that had been growing from the first moment when our eyes met became then strong and all-powerful. It was of you I thought when I found myself involved in that terrible scene. You, you had to be told immediately that I was innocent. That you should have doubted my honor for a moment was a thought too horrible. But you knew I was without reproach? There was no need for my note? And yet—yet——”

“If I had known you loved me! Oh, if I had known that!” she cried in a wail. “I thought your note was a rebuke. I thought you wanted to rob me of my triumph. For I knew you were innocent. I loved you, but I never thought you loved me. It was I who sent the husband to the wife’s room——”

“You!” He fell back.

“But not that you should suffer. I sent him that the guilty man might be found, and that I might reign there. When I knew your honor was involved it nearly killed me. You must believe that—oh, believe that! But I have kept silence all these years. I kept silence then, because of my ambition; it has kept me silent since. Now I will make reparation.”

He came near to her. “No. For my happiness, which is your happiness, you shall never speak.”

“For your mother’s?”

“You shall never speak,” he answered. “Let the dead past bury its dead. Let repentance be of the heart; if I have to forgive I forgive freely.” His

voice shook; his jaws were tight locked. "But you shall tell me again—one thing. You loved me?"

She bowed her head.

"Say it!" he pleaded in a breaking voice.

"I loved you—I love you," she answered.

With these words they went their separate ways. Not another word was uttered, not a look exchanged. Each with eyes straining into the dusk passed on—the one that way, the other this: two souls that had touched, and at the touch swiftly parted asunder. The last sunbeams drew backward from the earth, lights shone in the castle, and the large harvest moon, climbing above the slumbering woods, threw its soft silver rays upon the few sheaves on the upland.

"So the year's done with!
(*Love me for ever!*)
All March begun with!
April's endeavor
May-wreaths that bound me
June needs must sever!
Now snows fall round me,
Quenching June's fever—
(*Love me for ever!*)"

THE END.

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